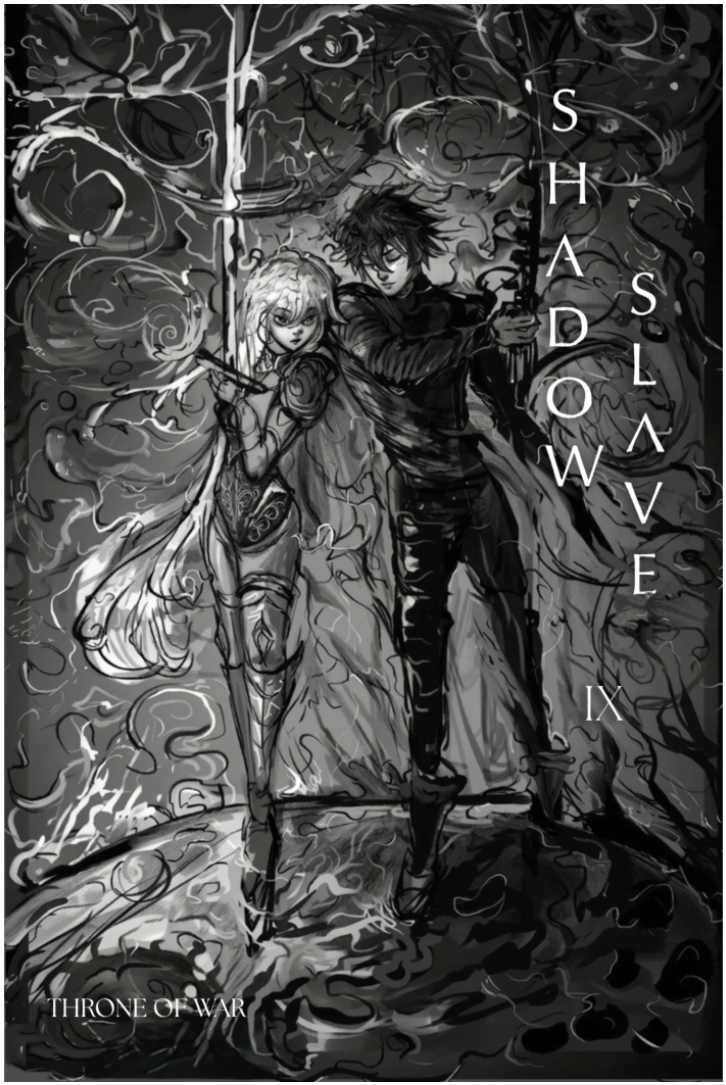
SHADOW SLAVE
IX
THRONE OF WAR

SHADOW SLAVE

Volume-9

Throne of War

Chapter-1841: Evil Minds That Plot Destruction

Sunny was standing on the edge of the Ivory Island, looking at the sky above. The Marvelous Mimic was behind him, still pretending to be a quaint brick cottage — the cottage stood between the grove and the lake, on the empty stretch of emerald grass to the side of the great pagoda.

The area was quite peaceful, and the view from his window was usually no less spectacular than it had been in Bastion.

…Of course, that peacefulness was deceiving.

The Ivory Island was high in the air. Far below it, the arm of the dead god lay heavily on the ashen ground. A long bridge was connecting the humerus and the radius, which had broken off eons ago… the bridge had been recently built, and currently, a vast column of warriors was marching across it, ready to enter Godgrave. A sea of vermilion banners fluttered above like blood.

The sight of the great army of the Sword Domain was quite daunting.

There were hundreds of thousands of Awakened, numerous Masters, and dozens of exalted Saints. Such a force had never been gathered in the history of humankind — or of the waking world, at least. There were countless mundane humans too, following the warriors in the vast train of the army.

Funnily enough, this great force had not been assembled to fight against Nightmare Creatures or other horrors of the Dream Realm. It had been assembled to wage war against a similar human army that was currently somewhere far away, on the other side of the titanic skeleton, scaling its right arm.

In any case, Sunny was not looking down, on the Sword Army. Instead, he was looking at the sky.

The sky had been blue and clear not too long ago, but now, it was being slowly devoured by grey clouds. They were finally crossing the realm boundary — soon, an annihilating white radiance would suffuse the incandescent heavens and spell fiery doom for anyone caught directly in its light.

He sighed.

It did not feel safe at all, to be invading Godgrave atop a flying island. No matter how powerful its enchantments were, the Ivory Island was enormous and immensely heavy — due to inertia, it would not be able to stop instantly should the veil of clouds break. Which meant that all of them would become ash.

'What a way to start a war.'

Technically, the war had already begun. The official declaration had happened soon after the Ivory Island left Bastion, almost a month ago. Back then, Nephis and Cassie had been summoned to the waking world… Sunny had been invited, as well, albeit as the Lord of Shadows, not the Memory Purveyor of the Fire Keepers.

There was a historic meeting in the stronghold of Clan Valor in NQSC. All the Saints of the Sword Domain were present, as well as the heads of those vassal clans that did not possess a Transcendent member at the moment.

What made it historic, though, was not the illustrious company. It was the fact that the King of Swords himself attended.

Sunny was quite shocked when the doors opened and a heavy presence suddenly settled in the opulent hall, forcing even the most powerful Saints to grow stiff and quiet. Of course, his face was hidden behind Weaver's Mask, so no one was the wiser.

They were seated around a vast round table — which, it seemed, had been carved from the trunk of a single enormous tree. The table held some significance, without a doubt… perhaps it was that tree in

particular that had been the source of the abominable forest slain by Anvil of Valor in the past.

In any case, there was an empty seat next to Morgan. Sunny guessed that, maybe, it had been left empty in honor of Saint Madoc, her uncle — but he was proven wrong.

As the vast presence enveloped the hall, there was the sound of heavy steps, and a tall man in dark armor entered, a vermilion cloak draped around his shoulders.

The man was naturally imposing in a way that made others cower. He was tall, with broad shoulders and a mighty build. His eyes were grey and cold like tempered steel, their gaze oppressive enough to make one shudder. His hair was black, and a full beard obscured the lower part of his austere face.

Despite that, it was impossible to miss how noble and distinguished it was.

The man was supposed to be close to fifty, but did not look a day older than thirty.

However, the most striking thing about him was not his height, his build, and his cold grey eyes. It was not even the oppressive force of his unfathomable, boundless presence.

It was something invisible and intangible. An otherworldly quality that forced one to look at him, pay attention to him… and want to kneel in front of him.

This was Anvil, the King of Swords.

Sunny had only seen him once before, from afar. He was still unsure what barriers there were that prevented the Sovereigns from visiting the waking world often, and what was the cost of breaking them. All he knew was that, today, the king had decided to descend into the mortal world.

The rest of the meeting was like a blur.

Anvil did not waste a lot of time, speaking in a calm and concise

manner — as if the very concept of wasting words was offensive to him. It did not seem like he was trying to explain something to the gathered powerhouses or wished to persuade them… instead, he was simply stating his will.

His message was clear. The rulers of the Song Domain had conspired to kill his daughter, and therefore, to harm the Sword Domain. Therefore, he would assemble an army to march on Ravenheart and tear down Ki Song's throne.

And those present, as his vassals, would become that army.

Sunny was so caught up in the solemn atmosphere and the irresistible authority hiding in Anvil's deep voice that he almost missed how ironic the whole thing was.

After all, there was the Han Li clan somewhere out there, still. That was the clan from which Caster, who had been sent to the Forgotten Shore to kill Nephis, hailed from. The orders to eliminate her in the Dream Realm had most likely come from the King of Swords.

But now, the very same king was proclaiming war on the pretense of punishing someone else for trying to assassinate her.

Sunny glanced at Nephis, wondering if she would show any reaction.

And, indeed, she did.

While everyone remained silent, either in agreement with the king or too wary of his power to raise a futile objection, she was the only one who spoke.

Nephis advocated against the war.

Her voice was even, and her expression was poised. She calmly listed all the reasons why a war would be disastrous for both Domains and asked her adopted father to reconsider.

Morgan seemed amused by the whole sequence of events, while the rest of those gathered in the hall kept their faces neutral.

In the end, Neph's words were meaningless. Anvil dismissed her

objection with one glance and a few cold sentences.

Everyone here knew that there was no point in trying to defy the Sovereign's will. Nephis, of course, knew it best of all.

The reason she had spoken out was not a sincere hope that the war could be avoided. Instead, it was important to do so for an entirely different reason — there had to be a record of her objecting to Anvil's decision.

There had to be rumors that Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan had been against the bloodshed, the waste of human life, and the ghastly ugliness of the civil war between humans from the very start. Even if it was all to avenge her against those who had conspired to kill her.

Those rumors were needed to pave a way for her to slay both her adopted father and Ki Song, and then usurp their thrones without being branded as a tyrant. When the time came, She had to be welcomed as a savior instead.

Sunny smiled behind his mask.

'What a treacherous world we live in...'

Not long after that, the Sword Domain declared war on the Song Domain.

The news was broadcasted in the waking world, as well as announced by heralds in the cities of the Dream Realm.

Both worlds seemed to explode.

Sunny was far away from civilization and too busy to observe the immediate reaction of the people, but it must have been intense. In an instant, the very foundation of the world was shaken. The government tried to handle the situation, somehow, but it was powerless against the influence of the Great Clans.

People in the waking world were terrified and paralyzed by shock. So were many in the Dream Realm.

There were plenty of those who welcomed the news, though, having been prepared by meticulous propaganda to feel exactly that way. On both sides, many were burning with militant zeal, and thirsting to punish the enemy.

And so, two great armies were gathered and marched to war.

It did not happen in a day, but it also did not take a lot of time. The preparations of the two Sovereigns had been extensive.

...Today, finally, the Sword Army was ready to enter Godgrave.

Chapter-1842: First Blood

As Sunny watched the sky, there was the sound of light steps behind him. Then, Nephis approached and stopped by his side, clad in a suit of lustrous steel armor.

She looked at him and smiled.

Despite the sinister clouds above and the vast army marching to a calamitous war below, he couldn't help but feel his heart race at the sight of that smile.

Sunny had read somewhere that people often described this feeling as having "butterflies in their stomach". The image of a swarm of Dark Butterflies tearing at the walls of his stomach seemed more dreadful than romantic, so he really doubted the literary sense of those people… but, still.

Even though a month had passed since their first kiss, he still felt excitement every time he saw her. It was odd and improper, to feel so blessed on the eve of a disastrous war. But he did.

Life was strange that way.

A smile appeared on his face, as well.

"Do you have enough spare time to visit a humble enchanter today, Lady Nephis?"

She lingered for a moment, then shrugged.

"I might have a little time…"

With that, she turned her head and looked at the sky, as well.

"Are you worried about the sun?"

Sunny nodded slowly.

"I am indeed a little nervous. Do you think that the clouds will hold until we land?"

Nephis inhaled deeply.

"Someone will make sure that they do. In fact… she should be arriving any moment now, actually."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

Then, a subtle spark ignited in his eyes.

There was the sound of fluttering wings, and a vast shadow fell on the emerald grass.

A moment later, a woman was standing in front of them. She was tall and slender, with long hair that fell down like a cascade of pale gold. Her posture was perfectly straight, and her cold face was dazzlingly beautiful.

The woman was wearing a suit of light steel armor, with pauldrons and greaves decorated with stylized feathers. The gaze of her stern amber eyes was piercing and heavy, and a white cloak hung on her back, embroidered with silver thread.

Saint Tyris had not changed at all.

Sunny was glad to see her… of course, he hid his happiness behind a mask of respectful unfamiliarity.

Sky Tide bowed slightly.

"Lady Changing Star."

Nephis nodded.

"Saint Tyris."

The two weren't very close to each other, but they had a good relationship due to what had happened during the Battle of the Black

Skull. In fact, there was probably no Saint among the vassals of Clan Valor with a deeper bond to Nephis than Sky Tide.

Her clan was also different from how it used to be. Its status was still far from being favored by the king, but now that Roan had Transcended, there were two Saints among the members of the clan. There were few Legacy families who could boast the same, so that alone made it impossible to ignore or oppress White Feather.

Much more importantly, Sky Tide's status soared now that the war was imminent. Her power over winds and clouds made her one of the most valuable people in Godgrave… which was a sword that cut both ways.

She was indispensable for the rulers of the Sword Domain, and therefore, they were forced to treat her nicely now.

On the other hand, she was one of the primary targets for the forces of the Song Domain. So, Sunny was more than a little bit worried about her.

Nephis, meanwhile, nodded curtly in his direction.

"This is Master Sunless. An enchanter employed by the Fire Keepers."

Saint Tyris looked at him expressionlessly, then frowned a little.

"Master Sunless… your name sounds familiar. Ah. Had my daughter commissioned a Memory from you?"

He bowed politely.

"Indeed, I had the privilege of fulfilling a request made by Awakened Telle once."

Sky Tide's expression did not change, but he could swear that her eyes turned a little warmer.

"I see. That Memory is serving my husband well. Your competence is worthy of praise, Master Sunless."

With that, she seemed to forget about his existence and looked at

Nephis.

"The realm boundary is close. How long will it take the Ivory Island to reach the target area?"

Nephis answered neutrally:

"Around an hour, at top speed. Will you be able to hold out for that long, if need be?"

Sky Tide glanced at the grey sky, lingered for a moment, then nodded.

"I will. I won't be able to assist with anything else, though."

The immolating sky was not the only threat that waited for them in Godgrave. It was the most dire one, though, so everything else was beside the point.

Nephis gestured for Saint Tyris to follow her and headed for the Ivory Tower.

"We will handle the rest. Allow me to guide you…"

As they were walking away, she threw a poignant look at Sunny.

He smiled and nodded subtly, telling her not to worry about him. As Master Sunless, he was not supposed to participate in any battles — so, he could only observe today. It was a strange situation to be in, but he could not complain.

There would be plenty of battles for him to fight before too long, anyway… perhaps more than he could handle, even with his seven bodies.

Letting out a heavy sigh, Sunny turned to the edge of the island and looked down.

At some point, the door of the Marvelous Mimic opened, and Aiko walked out, yawning as she looked around with sleepy eyes.

Noticing him, the petite girl floated off the porch and flew around the

cottage, eventually landing on the grass near the edge.

She looked down and made a face.

"Damn, boss. There are so many of them. So many potential clients!"

Sunny gave her a dark look.

"Cover your arms."

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Aiko was wearing mundane clothes — and not even formal ones, at that. Her black t-shirt had some kind of Nightmare Creature printed on it with a band name written above in bold letters… which wasn't really a problem, except for the fact that the intricate tattoo of a snake that coiled around her right arm was almost fully revealed.

She grinned sheepishly and summoned a green Memory tunic.

Sunny hesitated, then said quietly:

"Are you sure you don't want me to bring you away, to the waking world?"

Aiko looked up at him and blinked a few times.

"And miss all the fun… I mean, miss such a historic event? No, thanks. Plus, I know these guys well. Don't worry, boss, they'll be fine — they have survived worse."

He stared at her for a few moments, wondering if she would change her mind after witnessing Godgrave.

In the end, he didn't say anything. Together, they watched as the shoulder of the colossal skeleton grew closer and closer.

The Ivory Island accelerated, leaving the ascending army far behind. Soon, the sky was entirely hidden by a veil of clouds, and the air grew warmer, the daylight changing subtly.

They were heading for the collarbone of the dead deity, where the base camp of the Sword Army was supposed to be established. And

they — the Fire Keepers — were meant to be the vanguard of the human invasion into Godgrave.

Their task was not only to clear out the Nightmare Creatures populating the area and serve as a bulwark that protected the slow advance of the army from the arm of the titanic skeleton. What they had to do was much more important.

It was to bring the authority of the King of Swords, and the power of his Domain, to this cursed land.

Soon, the vast range of the ancient collarbone was beneath them.

The ground was white, but there was barely any of it visible under the thick carpet of scarlet growth. Moss, grass, and grotesque towering plants were all red, as if bloody marrow had exploded from the cracks and fissures in the ancient bone.

Of course, the vermilion jungle was teeming with all kinds of abominable creatures, all moving and devouring each other in a mad rush to live and grow in the unknown, but inevitably fleeting amount of time before the veil of cloud broke, and the merciless sun burned them all to ash.

At such a late stage of infestation, the surface of the dead god's collarbone was not much safer than the dark expanse of the Hollows, where the true horrors dwelled. The strange Nightmare Creatures populating Godgrave would have had enough time to grow immensely strong, reaching the Corrupted or Great Rank en masse.

The strongest would have already retreated underground, to try and claim a place for themselves away from the annihilating heavens, but many still remained.

And now, all their undivided attention was turned to the beautiful island drifting below the clouds.

Usually, these abominations would have felt nothing but fear when looking at the terrible sky. But today, perhaps for the first time in countless years, they felt something else.

A hunger so deep that it drove them into a state of frenzy.

Immediately, the scarlet jungle seemed to… boil.

Numerous abominations rushed in the direction of the descending island like a morbid tide. Most of them simply ran, slithered, or crawled, but there were those capable of soaring into the air, as well.

A vast swarm of Nightmare Creatures rose from the ground to meet the Ivory Island. It seemed inevitable that the flying Citadel would be swallowed by the cloud of them.

But then, an imperceptible change spread through the world.

Sunny's eyes narrowed when he recognized the familiar feeling.

Another Component of the Ivory Tower was unleashed, and suddenly, it was as if a wave of invisible force crashed into the rising abominations, throwing them down or outright obliterating their hideous bodies. Blood spilled from the sky like crimson rain.

The tyrannical Crushing had come to Godgrave, reaping countless lives in the first culling of the great Domain War.

Chapter-1843: Crash Landing on You

The Crushing descended upon Godgrave, flattening a vast swathe of the vermilion jungle and pressing the Nightmare Creatures into the white surface of the ancient bone. Its reach was a magnitude smaller than it had been in the ruins of the Kingdom of Hope… but its force was just as tyrannical.

The winged abominations that had been rising toward the flying island were either obliterated or thrown to the ground. A deluge of blood rained down, and only the strongest and most resilient of the flying horrors managed to stay in the air. They persisted stubbornly, their eyes full of demented frenzy.

There were terrifying aerial behemoths among them, and nimble creatures that zipped around on swift, translucent wings.

A moment later, the first arrow streaked down, hitting one of the larger abominations in the eye and obliterating half of its hideous head.

Sunny looked at the macabre spectacle, feeling his blood boil with a familiar thrill. He had never thought that he would grow accustomed to the ghastly crucible of battle one day, but here he was, acting as if he was addicted to it. He longed to join the bloodshed, but could not allow himself to. It was the strangest thing.

He could see the Fire Keepers, who were spread out along the edge of the island, drawing their bows. Some of them were better archers than others, but each and every one was proficient enough with the bow and arrow to be a lethal presence on the battlefield.

Their Memories were all top-notch, as well — not only because they had gathered a vast arsenal of them during the long years of

defending humanity from the horrors of the Nightmare Spell, but also because Sunny had personally tinkered with their equipment in the last month. On top of that, all these Memories were being enhanced by the Crown of Dawn that Nephis wore.

A barrage of enchanted arrows unleashed by seven Ascended cohorts was a dire sight to behold.

The winged Nightmare Creatures that had endured the Crushing were simply erased from existence, chunks of flesh raining on the scarlet jungle below. Only one remained — an enormous beast with wings wide enough to drown the world in their shade.

Its frenzied eyes were burning with chilling malice, and its pale brown hide was dotted with dozens of arrows, none of which managed to pierce it deep enough to deal substantial damage.

The winds groaned as they were torn apart by its mighty wings.

Before the monstrous creature could rise any higher, though, a single fiery arrow streaked down from the top of the Ivory Tower, piercing its head clean through. Wisps of white flame escaped from inside its cracked skull.

The massive abomination lost momentum, rolled in the air, and started to fall down.

The Ivory Island was plummeting from the overcast sky, descending lower and lower. The closer to the ground it got, the more the jungle was affected by the Crushing. Many of the Nightmare Creatures that had been pressed down into the red moss were now flattened into piles of bloody flesh, sharp shards of bone protruding through the broken skin.

Most were powerful enough to survive, though.

Finally, the speed of the flying island's descent started to reduce.

It was still great, nevertheless, almost uncontrollable — as if the people on the island were in a rush to reach the ground.

And they were. Because the sky above them was suffused with

blinding glow, and only a thin veil of clouds stood between them and inescapable annihilation.

"Brace!"

When the shout spread among the Fire Keepers, Sunny gracefully lowered himself to one knee and put one hand on the grass. Aiko simply floated into the air, hovering above the ground.

In the next moment, the Ivory Island crashed heavily into the white surface of the ancient bone.

The dead god's collarbone quaked, and a violent shockwave obliterated a vast stretch of the vermilion jungle in the vicinity of the impact zone. The seven chains hanging from the Ivory Island rattled as they struck the ground. The lake resting on its surface rippled, spilling over its shores, and the Chain Breaker swayed on the tall waves.

The Ivory Island came to rest, laying tilted on the white expanse of ancient bone.

The Crushing dissipated.

Down below, countless Nightmare Creatures moved, rising from the ground. Their bloodshot eyes focused on the figures of the Fire Keepers looking at them from above.

The cloud of debris raised into the air by the impact had not settled yet when they started to move, flowing toward the invading island from all sides.

However, the Fire Keepers were moving, too.

The closest to Sunny was Sid, who had been Neph's driver on the day of the assassination attempt. Clad in a light armor and armed with a sword and shield, she stepped up to the edge and looked at the tide of abominations with a grin.

Then, before the sparks of light swirling around her head manifested into a helmet, she raised her sword and kissed the flat of its blade.

"Here we go!"

Letting out a battle cry, she jumped down, the plume of her helmet fluttering in the wind.

All along the edge, those Fire Keepers who were proficient in melee were doing the same. Those who excelled in ranged combat, as well as those who usually played a supportive role, stayed above, continuing to send arrows and sorcerous attacks into the tide of Nightmare Creatures.

Soon, the fastest of the abominations reached the vicinity of the island and clashed with the advancing Fire Keepers. Sharp steel hissed as it cut into flesh.

More blood spilled on the sun-bleached surface of the ancient bone.

Sunny observed the battle with burning eyes. The familiar cacophony assaulted his ears, and he felt his hands itching. Nevertheless, he remained where he was, playing the role of a non-combatant.

Before the Fire Keepers could drown in the tide of Nightmare Creatures, a radiant figure shot from the balcony at the top of the Ivory Tower, falling down like an incandescent meteor.

Nephis landed in the thick of the abominable horde, and in the next moment, a blinding explosion boomed above the bone plain. A wave of incinerating flame spread outward from the point of impact, turning countless Nightmare Creatures to ash.

The Fire Keepers cheered, welcoming their personal deity to the battlefield.

Looking from above, Sunny let out a long sigh.

"Ah, to hell with it…"

Then, he took control of the gloomy shadow and used Shadow Step to send that incarnation of his far away, under the canopy of the scarlet jungle. Assuming a corporeal form there, he manifested the Onyx Mantle and summoned Weaver's Mask.

Then, before any of the rushing Nightmare Creatures could lunge at him, he stepped through the shadows once again, appearing in the midst of the battlefield.

An enormous, towering abomination was right in front of him, raising its terrifying fists to deliver a crushing blow to the ground below.

Reaching into the shadows, Sunny pulled an inky-black odachi out of them, and then lunged forward.

A dark line was suddenly drawn on the massive body of the Nightmare Creature. It froze for a moment, its fists still raised above its head…

And then slowly fell apart, bisected down the middle with a single terrifying slash.

Behind the abomination, a slender young woman with silver hair was revealed, holding a mirror-like sword.

There was an expression of surprise on her beautiful face.

Grinning behind the mask, Sunny gave her a small bow and said, his cold voice hiding a hint of dark glee.

"Welcome to Godgrave, Lady Nephis."

With that, he looked around.

"I hope you don't mind the mess…"

Chapter-1844: On the Other Side

"I think we are all going to die. What do you think, Rani?"

Ray's voice was tinged with melancholy, but Rain had learned to ignore his complaints in the last few weeks. Sitting on the ground — well, on what served as ground in this godforsaken place — and leaning her back against a wagon's wheel, she gave him a relaxed shrug.

The young man stared at her with indignation. After a while, he sighed.

"Have enough decency to look concerned, at least…"

They were currently in the middle of the army camp, resting after a long and arduous march. It was hard to tell what time of day it was, since there were no nights in Godgrave. A veil of clouds obscured the sky, shining with diffused radiance.

It would have been quite pretty if it was not so terrifying.

Everyone had been informed over and over again about the lethal nature of the sky in this land. They knew that the only way to survive in case the clouds parted was to remain absolutely still. The army had ascended the dead god's arm far enough, by now, to fully cross the realm boundary… so, those warnings were of vital importance.

They had yet to see the clouds break, though.

Rain, Tamar, Ray, and Fleur were among the Awakened warriors of the Seventh Legion — which was led by the seventh and last daughter of the Queen to reach Transcendence, Saint Seishan. Granted, Rain barely remembered how she ended up in such august

company. So many things had happened in the last month that it was all like a blur.

The news about the King of Swords declaring war on the Song Domain had reached them not long after reuniting with the members of the survey team in the main construction camp. It was a great shock to many, but not to Rain herself.

The initial shock was soon replaced by fear and outrage. It was then that Queen Song left her palace in Ravenheart, appearing in public for the first time in many years. Rain did not witness it herself, but she was told that the Queen's speech was incredibly rousing.

It ignited the hearts of the people of Song, so when the call to arms was issued, countless Awakened warriors chose to answer. The vassals of the Queen responded to the call, as well, gathering their armies to help defend the Song Domain against the tyranny of the King of Swords.

Rain was one of those Awakened warriors. She was made a soldier right there and then, in the construction camp, as a member of Tamar of Sorrow's cohort.

Tamar's father was leading his own war party, but he sent his daughter to serve under Song Seishan and her Blood Sisters — Rain wasn't entirely sure why, but she had no reason to complain.

There were hundreds of thousands of Awakened in the Song Army, but only seven royal legions. And although Saint Seishan was the last among the seven Transcendent princesses to conquer the Third Nightmare, her personal power was in no way inferior to that of her sisters.

So, the Seventh Legion was among the most elite forces in Godgrave, comparable to the Knights of Valor led by Morgan, the Princess of War.

Rain was honestly unsure how she had ended up here.

'I guess that's the benefit of getting in through acquaintances.'

The weeks between the declaration of war and today were incredibly

hectic. So many things had happened… and yet, one of them stood out as more bizarre than any other.

It happened immediately after Rain joined the Song Army. She was woken up in the middle of the night by her teacher, who gestured for her to follow him quietly. Together, they left the busy camp and walked far into the wilderness, eventually reaching a secluded gorge.

There, Rain had to stop and rub her eyes, bewildered by what she saw.

Out there, in the middle of the Dream Realm… a quaint brick cottage stood, illuminated by the pale light of the three moons.

The sight was so strange that Rain assumed that she was seeing things. However, she was not — there was really a neat cottage standing in the desolate wasteland of the Moonriver Plain, a walking distance from the main camp of the road construction crew. It was not a mirage, and neither was it an ancient ruin.

In fact, the brick building was neat and tidy, as if someone frequently swept its porch and washed its windows.

Rain looked at her teacher with wide eyes.

"What is that?"

He answered matter-of-factly:

"That… is an Ascended Devil pretending to be a cottage. Come inside."

She did not know what else to do but to follow him into the cottage. The door opened by itself, and then closed behind him.

The interior… looked like a dining hall of a small café. There was no one inside, and no source of light except for the moonlight pouring through the windows.

It was more than a little bit creepy.

A moment latter, the moonlight was extinguished, as well, leaving

Rain in absolute darkness.

"T—teacher?"

There was a scratching sound, and a small light appeared in the darkness. Her teacher was standing near a shelf, holding a burning candle in his hand.

"Come."

With that, he turned around and went back to the door. Rain had no idea why they had come inside only to leave with a candle, but she obediently followed.

To her shock, however…

The Moonriver Plain was gone. When they came out, there were no moons, no stars, and no wind. The floor was perfectly flat, as if cut from black marble. She couldn't quite see where they were, but it felt as if they were underground.

And there was someone else there, as well…

"Goddammit, it's so creepy… boss! Boss, you're back! Where the hell did you… huh? Who's that?"

Rain had the same question.

Out there in front of her, sitting on the black marble floor, was a little girl... who had a very dirty mouth and addressed her teacher as "boss", for some reason.

Rain raised a hand and pointed to the strange child:

"Who's the brat?"

The little girl floated up, lowered her feet to the floor, and stared at her with wide eyes.

"Brat? What do you mean, brat? I'm twenty-eight years old!"

Rain blinked a couple of times. She had assumed that the petite girl

was a child, but now that she looked closer…

'Ah, how embarrassing!'

Rain looked down.

"Oh… sorry, Auntie."

The petite girl opened her mouth in shock.

"A—auntie? No, wait, what do you mean by auntie?!"

Listening to the two of them, her teacher let out a heavy sigh and shook his head.

"To answer your questions… this is Awakened Rain. This is Awakened Aiko. Aiko, Rain is my disciple. Rain, Aiko is my assistant."

They turned to him almost simultaneously.

"You have an assistant?"

"You have a disciple?"

Then, they looked at each other, both wearing a similar shocked expression.

Her teacher smiled.

"No need to sound so stunned, really. Sure, I do. Why wouldn't I? Now, the reason I brought you two here… is to extend an offer to you both. Consider it a great honor."

His smile turned a little sinister, making both of them feel a bad premonition and shiver.

His smile turned a little wider.

"...How would you ladies like to join the Shadow Clan?"

And that was how Rain ended up with an intricate snake tattoo coiling around her arm.

Leaning on the wheel of a supply wagon, she closed her eyes and listened to Ray's complaints silently.

The snake tattoo, which was apparently called the [Mark of Shadows], was more than a simple tattoo, of course. It was akin to an Attribute, granting her several useful abilities. Among them was the ability to see in absolute darkness, walk stealthily in the shadows, and sense their movements.

It also helped her control her soul essence. Apart from that, the snake could also slither off her arm, manifesting into a weapon.

Most importantly of all — at least according to her teacher — it allowed him, as well as the creature that had created the soul snake, access to her Soul Sea. Which meant that they could defend it should something invade Rain's soul.

She had not even known that there were things out there that could invade human souls, but knowing that her teacher would be there to deal with the invader made her feel better.

All in all, the soul snake was an excellent gift to receive.

Of course, it was not the only thing she had received from her teacher…

Chapter-1845: Seventh Royal Legion

The [Mark of Shadows] played an important role. It protected Rain and gave her a few useful abilities, but its main purpose was to confuse people. After all, she did not want anyone to learn that she did not have an Aspect, and the snake tattoo bestowed upon her strange powers that could be seen as one.

Her teacher had mentioned that he was working on something else to make her disguise more convincing, as well. Rain did not know what he meant, yet, but was going to learn one way or another in due time.

What excited her the most was not the [Mark of Shadows], though.

It was the Memories her teacher had given her.

Oh, the joy and delight of having Memories!

Rain held a strong opinion that all the rest of the Awakened in the world had no idea how good they had it.

Her threadbare bodysuit and old clothes were gone, replaced by an enchanted armor. It was so soft and light that she did not feel any burden at all, but more resilient than her mundane equipment had ever been. The armor was made of dark grey fabric and lusterless black leather, fitting her perfectly.

It was an Awakened Memory of the Fifth Tier — that was what she had been told, at least — called the Puppeteer's Shroud.

Its enchantments increased her mental endurance and resistance against mind attack, as well as allowed her to recover from mental fatigue faster.

…The armor looked suspiciously similar to what her teacher used to wear, so she suspected that it had not been, in fact, crafted specifically for her. But even if the Puppeteer's Shroud was a hand-me-down, Rain did not mind.

The euphoria of having a wonderful suit of incredibly light, but resilient armor that adjusted to fit her body perfectly, cleaned and repaired itself, and could be summoned at any moment was simply too great!

It was the reward for slaying the Awakened Tyrant.

There were two other Memories that she had received from her teacher, as well. One was a powerful bow made of green metal… in fact, Rain knew that metal all too well. It seemed that her teacher had smelted the blade of the Huntsman's axe to forge the limbs of the bow, while the string was made from some strange black material.

The bow was called the [Beast of Prey], and was an Awakened Memory of the Third Tier. Its enchantment allowed Rain to enhance the damage dealt by her arrows, as well as infuse one arrow with devastating force at the cost of most of her essence. However, the bow was also able to absorb and store her essence, somehow — so, with sufficient preparation, Rain could use the deadly shot twice.

She received the Beast of Prey in exchange for the Memory coupon her teacher had given her for slaying the Huntsman.

The third Memory she received, however, was a free bonus. It was a quiver of enchanted arrows that never seemed to run out. The arrows did not really possess any special qualities, apart from the fact that their flight was absolutely noiseless. They were also incredibly sharp and could pierce thick armor.

All in all, Rain was quite happy with her little arsenal. Of course, it was only the beginning — she expected to receive many more Memories in the future. Sadly, her teacher seemed determined to only award her Memories that fit her kills.

He could have given her something much more powerful, without a doubt, but then people would start asking questions about her

identity. How could a newly Awakened girl with no backing be walking around with a soul arsenal that put even the Legacies to shame?

That sort of thing…

"Get up. Rest is over."

Tamar's voice drew Rain from her pleasant thoughts. Opening her eyes, she sighed and rose to her feet.

All around them, the Song Army was stirring. After ascending the right arm of the dead deity, they were finally ready to delve into the jungle growing on its white surface, and then cross to the colossal skeleton's collarbone. This rest stop was the last one they would be able to enjoy in relative safety.

The edge of the jungle was somewhere ahead, a few kilometers from the head of the column. The Seventh Legion was marching closer to its tail, so Rain could not see anything.

Nevertheless, everyone was tense. That was because everyone knew that they were heading into battle.

…Not that people like Rain and the members of her cohort could do anything in a battle like that. From what they had heard in the last few days, the jungle had been allowed to grow for long enough that most Nightmare Creatures populating its depths were of the Corrupted Rank. Awakened warriors were simply not powerful enough to face them.

Today, the battle was only for the Masters and the Saints.

And for the abominations enthralled by Beastmaster.

Just as Rain thought about it, a messenger arrived from the head of the column and hurried past them. She turned around and watched him disappear into the command tent of the legion.

Soon, several Blood Sisters emerged from it.

And then, their leader.

Rain couldn't help but hold her breath when she saw the Queen's daughter. Saint Seishan… was a striking woman, without a doubt.

With her strange, but beautiful grey skin and tantalizing grace, she was like an embodiment of nobility and regal poise. She seemed both inhuman and riveting, but most of all mysterious.

Her beauty was truly breathtaking.

It was to the point that the Blood Sisters, each an exquisitely beautiful woman herself, seemed plain and unassuming next to her. Rain still found it weird that most of the most powerful warriors of the Song Domain were women… but she couldn't complain. Especially here in the Seventh Legion, she sometimes felt that she was in a flower garden instead of an army.

Granted, those flowers were roses with bloodied thorns, and most of the rank and file soldiers were still men.

Saint Seishan led the Ascended warriors of her legion toward the head of the column. The Awakened warriors silently bowed as she passed, wishing her luck.

Rain couldn't help but do the same.

The Song Army was bound to suffer casualties during the push to establish a fortified base on the collarbone of the dead deity. Looking at the powerful members of the legion, she couldn't help but wish that all of them returned alive.

At the same time, Rain couldn't help but wonder…

Today, they were going to fight against Nightmare Creatures.

What would she feel when the time finally comes for them to fight against people?

Chapter-1846: Ground Perspective

The army assembled in a complicated battle formation. With so many soldiers, it was vast and unwieldy, and mostly useless… but not entirely so.

The Masters and the Saints were going to assault the vermilion jungle, but the Awakened were prepared to fight, as well.

Obviously, they had very little chance of killing Corrupted abominations, not to mention the Great horrors who dwelled in Godgrave. However, they did not necessarily need to.

The commanders of the Song Army were well aware of the limitations facing their troops, so they had come up with various chilling, but effective strategies. If it came to that, the task of the Awakened soldiers was not to kill the powerful abominations, but to immobilize them.

Although hard, that could be achieved with numbers alone. Even if an abomination had to be buried in human bodies, that was one way to deal with it.

Of course, Rain felt a bit horrified by the prospect, just like all the other Awakened warriors did. Still, it was not like the Nightmare Creatures would spare them otherwise — so, they were prepared to carry out their orders and do their best, no matter the cost.

Hopefully, that was not going to happen today.

If the Saints and their Ascended retinue succeeded in holding back the tide of Nightmare Creatures, it would not.

The Seventh Legion was positioned in the second line of the

formation, so she could not even see the battle. All she could see were the tops of the strange and hideous plants swaying in the distance and the backs of her fellow soldiers. She could also hear the sounds that the wind carried from somewhere far ahead.

Next to her, Fleur trembled nervously and looked at Tamar.

"...It is starting, isn't it?"

The Legacy girl nodded somberly.

"It is."

A few moments later, the sound of a horn rolled above the army, and the ground under their feet trembled slightly.

Rain saw vague silhouettes moving forward from the front of the battle formation. The white surface of the ancient bone was still inclined, since they had not reached the collarbone yet, so she could not discern their shape clearly. But she knew that they were the Saints who had assumed their Transcendent forms, as well as the larger of the Nightmare Creatures enthralled by Beastmaster.

At the same time, the jungle came alive.

She saw the red trees sway, but mostly, she heard and felt it: a harrowing choir of bestial roars and sounds too alien to be described with human language washing over the massive army like a tide, the violent trembling of the ground as countless abominations rushed forward at the scent of human souls.

She glanced at Tamar.

For the rest of them, the fate of the Saints fighting on the frontline was an abstract concept. The Saints were people whom they admired, looked up to, and maybe even knew — as well as the wall separating them from having to face the dreadful horde of Nightmare Creatures themselves.

But it was different from Tamar, whose father was somewhere out there, as well. The Saint of Sorrow was among the warriors whose task it was to make the tide of abominations stop.

There were close to two thousand Masters in the Song Army, but only around forty Transcendent champions.

It did not seem like a lot, but at the same time…

The world suddenly quaked.

The world suddenly seemed to be on the verge of shattering.

The violence of forty Saints unleashing their Transcendent power at the same time was staggering.

Even far removed from the battlefield, Rain felt blood drain from her face. Next to her, Fleur swayed and leaned heavily on Ray. All around them, the Awakened soldiers staggered.

Only Tamar remained standing straight, seemingly undaunted.

She did, however, look at the sky.

As Rain's eyes widened, she did as well.

…Was the clash between the champions of the Song Army and the creatures of the vermilion jungle terrible enough to rip apart the veil of clouds?

Luckily, it did not seem so.

For now.

The sounds of the battle grew much more loud, becoming almost deafening. Rain had to struggle not to raise her hands and cover her ears. To her shame, she found herself trembling.

'Insane, insane… this is insane…'

The fear that had risen from some deep, primal part of her was almost too powerful to overcome. The inability to see what exactly was happening out there, ahead, only made it worse. After all, it was the unknown that was the most terrifying.

All she could see were the backs of the Awakened soldiers that stood

in front of the Seventh Legion in the formation.

They were not faring any better than her.

Some were shaking. Some had fallen to their knees. Some had dropped their weapons.

There were those who did not, though. There were those who helped their comrades to stand up and supported them, gripping the hilts of their swords tightly.

Rain wanted to be one of those brave souls, as well.

Assaulted by the terrible cacophony of battle, she looked down, at her shadow.

The sight of it instilled her with strength.

Gritting her teeth, she raised a hand and patted Fleur on the shoulder. The delicate girl looked at her with frightened eyes.

"R—rani?"

Rain smiled.

"Relax. What's the worst thing that can happen?"

Fleur's beautiful blue eyes widened.

"What?! Why did you say it out loud?!"

Tamar and Ray glared at her with resentment, too.

Rain grinned.

She was still a bit of a stranger in this small cohort, so apart from Tamar, the other two members acted a little awkward around her.

It was rare to see all three united in such a sincere display of emotion.

And that emotion was pure outrage, not fear or anxiety. So, her job here was done.

Rain looked ahead and sighed.

Although… she might have overdone it.

From what she could hear, the vanguard of the army had managed to stem the tide of the Nightmare Creatures. A furious battle was happening somewhere ahead.

However, the Saints had not managed to stop all abominations.

Just then, she heard a litany of human cries, and saw bodies flying into the air. It was as if something massive slammed into the front row of the Awakened soldiers at the head of the battle formation.

Human blood spilled on the white bone.

The war horn blared one more time, and the soldiers ahead of her moved forward.

Rain shivered and gripped her bow tighter.

Far ahead, a strange haze rose above the crimson jungle.

It seemed like a haze at first, but soon, she saw that it was a vast swarm of flying abominations rushing from the depths of Godgrave like a cloud.

"G—gods!"

One of the Awakened soldiers near them pointed at the swarm in horror.

Rain sighed and looked at the members of her cohort apologetically.

Her grin grew a little forced.

"Well… I guess that's the worst thing that could have happened…"

Chapter-1847: Deadly Equilibrium

On the other side of the titanic skeleton, the Ivory Island was surrounded by a sea of Nightmare Creatures. The horde of them flowed forward, tearing the scarlet jungle apart.

The jungle itself was moving too. Vermilion vines were crawling, and rust-red flowers were blooming, releasing clouds of flesh-eating pollen. It was as if the whole world had come alive to devour the invading humans.

The humans, meanwhile, met the tide of abominations with sharp steel and the destructive power of their Aspects.

The Fire Keepers were skilled and formidable. Their discipline and morale were beyond reproach. Their cohesion and experience were unequalled. Countless Nightmare Creatures fell to their blades, torrents of blood being absorbed by the ancient bone.

And yet, they were being pushed back.

A force of fifty battle-hardened Masters was truly fearsome, but most of the abominations they faced were of a higher Rank than them. These creatures were also the cursed spawn of Godgrave, where nightmares had to fight and devour each other without reprieve for the infinitely small chance to survive.

The surface dwellers were not the true horrors who hunted in the dim twilight of the great Hollows, but they were also exorbitantly fierce and ferocious, even when compared to the usual demented frenzy plaguing all Nightmare Creatures.

The horde was vast, as well.

Granted, the Fire Keepers had been forged and shaped by the Forgotten Shore, and so, facing abominations that were more powerful than them was more or less their speciality. But, still…

There was one reason why they were able to hold out.

Two reasons, actually.

One was Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan. The other was the Lord of Shadows.

It had been a long time since Sunny was truly able to unleash himself. Right now, he was like a dark hurricane that moved across the battlefield, surrounded by a vast mantle of flowing shadows. He neglected to manifest any of his Shells, using only his two hands and the black odachi to cut the abominations down.

Everywhere he went, severed bodies fell to the ground.

Sunny was using Shadow Manifestation to control the surrounding area and Shadow Step to move around it, dancing between the Nightmare Creatures as his blade reaped their lives. While wielding Serpent as a weapon, his essence was replenished with every life he took.

The faster he killed the abominations, the more essence he received — and could therefore burn. And the more essence he burned, the more enemies he could slay. Reaching a dangerous equilibrium in that manner, Sunny rampaged on the battlefield like the epicenter of a vast whirlpool of blood, darkness, and death.

Of course, it was not easy.

The Corrupted Nightmare Creatures were falling easily to his blade, but he could be just as easily overwhelmed by them. All it took was a single mistake…

But Sunny did not make any mistakes.

Despite the startling speed at which he moved around the battlefield, despite the daunting complexity of navigating it with no regard to the familiar constraints of linear space, despite the burdensome task of

maintaining both the lethal dance of slaying steel and the flowing storm of manifested shadows…

Sunny's mind remained cold and clear, aware of every little detail of his surroundings, and full of merciless killing intent.

He did not allow the dire mayhem of the battle and the intoxicating stench of death to pull him into a state of battle frenzy. No matter how brutal and unbridled his slaughter seemed, it was instead a result of precise and callous calculation. There were no emotions in his heart, no distraction in his mind — there was only clarity and will.

The will to see his enemies dead.

...Nephis was fighting on the other side of the Ivory Island. Sunny could not see her, but he could sense her presence through the movement of shadows.

In the world of shadows, her presence was as vast as that of the sun.

She had unleashed a sea of incandescent flames, turning a swathe of the battlefield into a searing inferno. The flames moved as if possessing a mind — and hunger — of their own, spreading through the horde of Nightmare Creatures like a plague. Where the power of the scorching flames was not enough, her sword fell like a herald of inescapable finality.

At the same time, she was supporting the Fire Keepers. When one of them received a wound, it was healed by the soft radiance of her soulflame. When one of them was on the verge of being swallowed by the tide of abominations, she was there to lend them the power of her incandescent blade.

Cassie was participating in the battle, as well.

Her unseen presence was subtle, but played a pivotal role. She was not present on the battlefield, and no Nightmare Creature fell to her sword. However, she served as the connection between Sunny, Nephis, and the Fire Keepers. She was aware of all and guided them all, helping them fight as a single being.

She could also share the traits of the abominations with them, making the task of surviving the dreadful onslaught much easier.

It was because of her that Nephis knew when one of her people needed support. The Fire Keepers knew when to press forward and when to retreat. Sunny knew where the most dangerous enemies were, and in which direction he had to move.

Nephis was in command, but Cassie was the person who made sure that the commander had all the necessary information to make good decisions.

Sunny had not seen the Fire Keepers fighting a battle of that scale before, and now that he did… he was quietly impressed.

He knew many who were more powerful than them, and a few who were more skilled than them. But he struggled to think of another group of warriors who were capable of showcasing this level of cohesion, combat awareness, and effectiveness in a battle.

That said…

It was still not enough.

It did not matter how skilled and brave the Fire Keepers were, or how unreasonably powerful he and Nephis had become. At the end of the day, they were still fighting against impossible odds.

There were simply too many Nightmare Creatures, and each of these Nightmare Creatures was too powerful.

Sending fifty Masters and three Saints to face an entire Death Zone was a suicidal task. They could not even retreat, because they were surrounded from all sides.

However…

This time, Clan Valor had not sent Nephis into battle hoping that she would die.

This time, they desperately needed her to survive... for a while, at least.

Chapter-1848: Reign of Steel

Sunny sensed it before he saw it.

An invisible, but undeniable change that spread across the battlefield.

He was not affected himself, but the Fire Keepers certainly were. They did not grow stronger, and their swords did not become sharper…

And yet, suddenly, more Nightmare Creatures were falling to their blades. More blood was flowing to the ground, but less of it belonged to humans.

Observing the inexplicable change through shadow sense, Sunny couldn't help but feel a deep sense of confusion. There was no reason for the sudden shift in the cadence of the battle, but it had shifted, without a doubt.

Lacking any other explanation, he was tempted to think that it was a result of luck.

But there was something deeper than that going on…

He continued the wanton slaughter, defending one side of the Ivory Island.

At the same time, he was standing on the grass of the island, near the Marvelous Mimic, observing the battle idly side by side with Aiko.

It was that incarnation of his that tried to understand what was happening.

Almost an entire minute passed before his eyes suddenly narrowed.

Sunny exhaled slowly.

'I… see.'

The Fire Keepers were not lucky. They had not grown stronger, and their weapons had not become sharper.

It was just that they were fighting better.

Their already impressive coordination had improved, reaching an almost inhuman level of perfection, and their battle sense seemed to have become even keener. It was as if they were possessed by a spirit of war, and had received its blessing.

He had seen something similar once before, albeit in a less pronounced way.

It was during the Battle of the Black Skull. Back then, Morgan had armed her soldiers with enchanted swords forged by her father — wielding those swords, the warriors of Valor showed a strange level of cohesion, making it seem as if her entire army was one vast, lethal being.

Back then, Sunny had guessed that the swords served as conduits for Anvil's authority… as vessels of his will, and therefore, of his Domain.

And now, his Domain had spread to Godgrave.

After all, that was the entire reason why the Ivory Island was so important to Valor's plan of subjugating this cursed land and winning the war. The entire war was, at its heart, a race to conquer local Citadels and allow the Sovereigns to express their power here.

At the end of it all, the Supreme who controlled more Citadels in Godgrave, and could therefore manifest their Domain in a more profound way, would have a great advantage in the battle against the enemy.

The Queen of Worms was still powerless in this dreadful land, since there was nothing to summon her authority here. But Clan Valor had Nephis, and her flying Citadel as well — that was why they had tolerated Sunny's defiant unwillingness to surrender the Nameless Temple to them, and that was why they were already winning.

Because, unlike Ki Song, Anvil could already express his power in Godgrave.

And he was expressing it now. It had already spread in the vast area around the Ivory Island, and rooted itself in the ancient bone, under the cloudy sky, empowering his subjects.

That was why the Fire Keepers were suddenly more effective in the fight against the Nightmare Creatures. And that was why the Sword Army would have far less trouble entering the scarlet jungle — the spot where the Ivory Island landed had been chosen carefully to make sure that the King's authority covered the army's approach.

But that was not all.

Sunny shivered, suddenly overwhelmed by a cold presence.

Turning around, he looked up, at the balcony of the Ivory Tower.

'N—no way…'

There, a tall figure in dark armor stood, a vermilion cloak fluttering in the wind.

A crown made out of dull steel rested on his head.

The King of Swords had arrived to Godgrave.

…Then, the world was consumed by a scarlet storm.

Countless sparks enveloped the Ivory Island and the sky above it, swirling like a hurricane of scarlet light. There were so many of them that it seemed as if the whole world was suddenly desaturated of all colors except for red.

Then, the sparks formed into a sea of rustling swords.

An endless river of them blotted out the sky, moving in strange, hypnotic patterns.

Mesmerized by the sight and drowning in their shadow, Sunny almost forgot about the figure of a man standing on the balcony of

the Ivory Tower.

The man did not move, but his cold gaze fell on the horde of Nightmare Creatures below.

In the next moment, the storm cloud of swords exploded with a lethal hail.

Countless swords rained down, making the bone plain shudder.

Down below, Sunny's avatar lowered the black odachi and froze.

It was a terrifying feeling, to see the steel sky fall on him, glistening with countless sharp tips.

However, he did not have to feel fear.

Although it seemed that the rain of swords would obliterate everything on the surface of the ancient bone, none of the falling blades struck him. Instead, they reaped a terrible harvest of lives, piercing every Nightmare Creature in sight.

In just a few moments, the horde of them was eviscerated. Numerous abominations were violently impaled by the flying swords, while those that survived the first onslaught were either bloodied or petrified, slow to escape the inevitable doom.

None of the Fire Keepers had received even a scratch, though, despite the fact that many of them were now surrounded by a forest of swords.

The swords did not stop moving.

More of them rained from above, and those that were impaling the Nightmare Creatures tore free of the bleeding flesh, rising into the air and turning to point at new prey.

Standing in the sea of blood, Sunny turned and looked at the distant balcony.

He should have felt elated because the battle was ostensibly over…

But instead, all he felt was a cold feeling of unease.

Sunny knew that, one day soon, he would be the target of these flying swords.

'What's the matter? It's just a Sovereign.'

For once, the words did not bring with them any levity.

Lowering his gaze, he peered at the horizon.

There, far away…

The first of the vermilion banners appeared in the distance.

The Sword Army had crossed over to the collarbone of the dead deity.

Chapter-1849: Taste of Ash

The Sword Army entered Godgrave with relative ease. Of course, it was a tense and solemn day. The Awakened warriors were pale with dread as they ventured into the scarlet jungle and crossed over from the humerus bone of the dead deity to the vast collarbone.

They were in a Death Zone, after all.

However, the army barely suffered any casualties. Changing Star and her Fire Keepers had pulled the attention of the local Nightmare Creatures away and established a beachhead on the collarbone plain. Most importantly, they brought the authority of the king to this dire purgatory — emboldened and empowered by his presence, the army marched on.

The veil of clouds did not break, held together by the power of Sky Tide of the White Feather clan. The Transcendent and Ascended warriors repelled the sporadic attacks of remnant abominations without too much strain. And later, the King of Swords himself descended upon the battlefield, using the Ivory Island as an anchor.

Once the storm of swords manifested above the jungle, the battle was ostensibly over.

The army cut a path through the predatory jungle, using the beautiful silhouette of the Ivory Tower to navigate it. By the time they reached the scene of slaughter, there were no abominations left for them to fight against. They were only numerous corpses and the rustle of countless swords swirling in the sky above.

Instead, the task they faced was of a more mundane nature. They had to establish a camp and start fortifying it, building an impregnable fortress on the surface of the ancient bone. That fortress would serve as the staging ground for the rest of the military campaign in Godgrave.

…The Song Army, however, fared much worse than that.

***

Rain was staring at the ground with a tired expression. On the ground in front of her, the wind was playing with flakes of ash.

She was staying completely motionless, and those flakes of ash had been a person not too long ago. Above her, an incandescent white void shone blindingly through the broken clouds.

Her first day in Godgrave had been a long, bitter nightmare.

The first battle the Song Army had fought was a sobering experience. Led by the seven princesses, the Saints and the Ascended warriors of the Song Domain clashed with the horde of Nightmare Creatures and repelled it. The unimaginable violence unleashed by that clash made the world quake — but, worst of all, some of it reached the battle formation of the Awakened warriors.

The casualties were not immeasurable, but they weren't negligible, either. Perhaps because it was the first time the soldiers fought against the abominations of Godgrave, the strategies developed by the royal clan to breach the difference in Ranks between them could not be deployed promptly, or at all.

That could improve as the army gained experience, but today, too many people died.

Rain herself did not participate in the slaughter, because the Seventh Legion was positioned in the second line of the formation, where the battle had not reached. However, she could hear and feel the terrible mayhem of the desperate struggle happening ahead.

Nevertheless, eventually, the battle ended. The vanguard obliterated the horde of the frenzied Nightmare Creatures. Those of them who had got past were immobilized and eventually cut down by the Awakened soldiers. After the soul shards were harvested, the corpses of the abominations were pushed aside, and the bloodied army continued to ascend the arm of the dead god.

Soon enough, they entered the jungle.

The jungle itself was as much of a shock to the invading humans as the horde of Nightmare Creatures had been. Everything here was not what it seemed — but all of it was insidious, hungry, and chillingly deadly. The grass, the flowers, the vines, the trees… every single thing here wanted them dead.

Those of the soldiers who had more experience exploring the Dream Realm did not seem too phased, taking the dread of the scarlet jungle in stride. But those who were younger and less experienced, like members of Tamar's cohort, were left shaken.

Their mental fortitude was sorely tested, and that was after having already received a painful blow by the recent clash against the vast horde of abominations.

If there was one silver lining to the situation, it was that the abominable flora of Godgrave was not as impervious to being damaged by the Awakened as the Corrupted Nightmare Creatures were. It was still incredibly tough and tenacious, but they could at least try to contend against the myriad of deadly dangers hiding in the jungle. So, they did not feel as helpless, at least.

There were still many that died.

Some died, screaming, after inhaling a bit of drifting pollen. Falling to the ground, then wailed and convulsed as their bodies gruesomely became fertile soil for sprouting blossoms.

Some died after being stung by tiny insect-like vermin that crawled into their armor. The effect of the paralytic poison was instantaneous, making the victims fall down without making a sound… however, it was unclear if they remained conscious and felt excruciating pain when the eggs deposited by the vermin into the wounds started to hatch a dozen seconds later.

Some were strangled and drained of blood by thorned vines that hid beneath the vermilion moss. Some were pulled below it by what had looked like harmless patches of scarlet grass.

It was all like a ghastly nightmare. Rain would have thought that they were invading the very depths of hell… if not for the fact that

the Dream Realm was much more harrowing than any hell imagined by a human could ever be.

Luckily, she had no time to drown in terror.

The army marched forward in a vast battle formation. The train was absorbed into the formation and protected in its center, while the various legions and divisions took turns defending the outer perimeter. The entire arrangement was spearheaded by the thralls of Beastmaster, who faced the most dire peril and suffered the heaviest casualties.

On the flanks, the warriors of higher Ranks dealt with the brunt of the danger once again. But Awakened soldiers like Rain also had a lot to do — both when marching on the outer rim of the formation and when resting closer to its center.

She had killed plenty of scurrying pests with her arrows, saving not only her life but also that of others. Her arrows seemed to not know how to miss, striking down even the smallest pests with daunting precision long before they could sink their stingers, mandibles, and beaks into human flesh.

In truth, she was a bit safer in this hellish place than most Awakened were. It was because she could sense the movement of shadows, and therefore detect dangerous movement even if her sight betrayed her.

And yet, Rain was swiftly growing tired… exhausted, even.

It was not because of marching or having to draw her bow over and over again. It was not even because of having to climb the steep slope of the dead god's humerus bone without rest.

It was due to the mental strain of enduring the horror of Godgrave without allowing herself to break down.

Rain had thought that she was accustomed to the dread of the Dream Realm after hunting in the wilderness around Ravenheart for four years. But now, she realized just how tame those settled regions of this terrible world were after being conquered and cleansed by the previous generations of Awakened. Compared to Godgrave,

Ravenheart was a paradise.

She was barely holding on to her composure… if not to her sanity.

But even then, after a while, the march became easier.

Humans were supremely adaptable, after all. The jungle did not change, but the soldiers of the Song Army had adapted to its gruesome reality — at least a little bit.

Eventually, they reached the mountainous shoulder joint that connected the titanic humerus to the collarbone. The engineering corps swiftly established a robust bridge under the protection of the First Legion, and then, the Song Army slowly started to cross over to the other side of the bottomless chasm.

The crossing was perhaps the most perilous step of the invasion of Godgrave. Rain felt incredibly tense while the Seventh Legion waited for its turn to enter the bridge… however, in the end, they reached the collarbone plain without any trouble.

The jungle on the other side was much the same, but somehow, everyone felt safer.

That feeling was a lie.

No sooner than the last division had crossed over, a strong wind rose, and a loud wailing of a war horn washed over the entire army. That horn was different from the ones that had called them to battle, and much more anxious.

"Don't move!"

Tamar's shout was quite timely. The members of her cohort remembered the meaning of the wailing horn despite their fatigue and mental exhaustion, but many of the surrounding soldiers were slow to react. Hearing her voice, they recalled their training.

The entire army suddenly grew still.

A few moments later, the world was suddenly much brighter. The light reflecting from the white surface of the ancient bone was almost

painful to look at… a wave of unbearable heat crashed into the human invaders, and the smell of ash filled the air.

The jungle burned.

…Many humans burned, too

Well, perhaps "burning" was not the right word. They just turned to ash, scattering into a cloud of grey flakes in the scorching wind, and disappeared without a trace.

Not everyone had ceased all movement in time, and not everyone managed to remain perfectly motionless.

Seeing their comrades die, some soldiers recoiled or flinched.

They became ash, too.

Rain could not move, could not look away, and could not even wipe the flakes of warm ash off her face.

All she could do was stand still and stare at the ground.

'It's bitter.'

The first day in Godgrave… was too bitter to swallow.

They had not even clashed with the army of the Sword Domain, and so many people were already dead. Yes, their number was inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. But their deaths were not.

Rain couldn't help but feel as if they had been beaten without even entering a battle.

She was tired.

…After a few hours, and more deaths, the veil of clouds finally repaired itself. The Song Army took a short rest, most soldiers sitting on the ground quietly, despondent and unable to say anything.

Then, they continued the march.

By evening — or whatever constituted evening in this eternally sunlit hell — they finally reached the area where the army basecamp was supposed to be established.

Not everyone had made it that far.

But for those who had…

The war was only starting.

Chapter-1850: War Council

The camp of the Sword Army resembled a fortified city that was like a dark stain on the sun-bleached surface of white bone, adorned by a sea of scarlet banners. The vicious jungle had been pushed back and incinerated some days ago, and was only now spreading tentatively from the fissures of the titanic collarbone.

Tendrils of red moss could be seen here and there, looking like patches of rust on the vast expanse of the bone plain. The sky above was grey and cloudy, yet suffused with blinding light.

Tall walls surrounded the sprawling avenues of the basecamp, and protected by their impregnable barrier, countless barracks and tents crowded the relatively limited space. The camp was a cauldron of activity, with thousands of soldiers going about their business in a tense atmosphere.

When one looked at the fortress of the Sword Army, they could hardly imagine that it had not existed just a week ago. However, it was true — the entire city had been built in a matter of days, not decades or centuries.

That was what hundreds of thousands of Awakened were capable of when brought together by a common goal.

There were many among them who possessed potent utility Aspects, and many more who could lend their physical strength and unique Abilities to hasten the construction. So, the city had risen from the ground with a speed that was in no way inferior to how fast the scarlet jungle grew and propagated after being reduced to ash.

There were two towering landmarks in the sprawling fortress. One was the Ivory Island, which hovered a few meters above the ground, anchored to it by seven colossal chains to remain completely still. The beautiful white pagoda standing on its soil was like a beacon of

hope for the soldiers of the Sword Army, raising their spirits every time they saw it.

The other was the dark rift of the Dream Gate, which tore the fabric of reality apart some distance away. The King of Swords had moved it from Bastion to Godgrave, announcing to the world the gravity of his intent to see the rulers of the Song Domain pay for their transgressions.

Currently, fresh supplies were arriving at the camp from the waking world.

Sunny looked at the flurry of activity with a frown. It was tremendously convenient, of course, to have a direct logistical connection to the waking world here in Godgrave. The Song Army lacked that advantage, still, which was why they had to scavenge provisions in the jungle or wait for heavily guarded convoys to deliver them across the Moonriver Plain and up the left arm of the dead deity.

The road Rain had helped build drastically shortened the time needed for each convoy to arrive, true, but it was still a point of vulnerability… one that he personally would be exploiting in the near future, perhaps, by launching raids to break the supply chains established by the Song Army. That was one of the duties the Lord of Shadows had agreed to, after all.

Nevertheless, he did not like the presence of the Dream Gate here in Godgrave. Not because it was particularly unnerving, but simply because it was a point of vulnerability, as well — it was just that the vulnerability lay in the waking world, not in the Dream Realm.

The servants of the Queen could not cross the vast collarbone of the dead god, lay siege to the King's fortress, and destroy the supplies arriving through the Dream Gate. However, they could easily stage a devastating attack on Valor's distribution facilities in the waking world, not caring about the collateral damage and widespread destruction such an assault would entail.

There was actually a mutual agreement between the two warring sides to keep the bloodshed contained to the Dream Realm. No one

wanted for their soldiers to be afraid that their physical bodies would be destroyed while they were fighting the war. No one wanted for their families to be put in danger while they were on the battlefield, either.

The government was supposed to ensure that neither side broke the agreement.

However…

Sunny wasn't sure how long that agreement would last. He was even more doubtful that the government would be able to do anything if the mayhem of the Domain War spilled into the waking world.

If anything, such an eventuality seemed all but inevitable.

Shaking his head, he looked away from the Dream Gate and hurried his steps. No matter his opinion, he could not be late today.

'This… is not going to be strange at all.'

Wearing the vermilion cloak of a Valor Knight, he was following Nephis and Cassie to the center of the camp. A few Fire Keepers were there, as well, clad in their armor. Everyone they passed greeted them with admiration and reverence.

At the same time, Sunny was heading in the same direction from the outskirts of the camp, his body encased in the stonelike metal of the Onyx Mantle, his face hidden behind the fearsome visage of Weaver's Mask. Saint was walking behind him, indifferent crimson flames burning behind the visor of her helmet.

The glances thrown at them were full of fear and apprehension.

Today, Sunny was meant to attend a war council where the next actions of the Sword Army would be decided.

…In two different incarnations, no less.

The prospect sent his mind for a spin.

The Lord of Shadows was a natural choice to participate in such a

meeting, of course. Both his power and status were more than great enough to earn him a spot at the table. But Master Sunless ended up being invited to the council by pure happenstance.

It was simply because his status as a Knight Commander, no matter how bogus, was still technically a real one. Therefore, he had been incredibly surprised to receive orders to attend the strategy meeting along other notable officers of the Sword Army.

It was both funny and concerning.

At this rate, he might actually end up leading the warriors of Valor into battle. The probability was infinitely small, but not entirely impossible.

'Let's hope something like that won't happen. I really don't want to end up as a hero of the Sword Domain because of some ridiculous misunderstanding…'

Just then, they finally reached the stone stronghold that stood at the heart of the camp, towering above every structure except for the Ivory Tower and the Dream Gate and resembling a castle. That stronghold was where Anvil of Valor, the King of Swords, held court.

One would have expected that he would stay in the comfort of the only Citadel the Sword Domain possessed in Godgrave, and Nephis had even been prepared to surrender her living quarters at the top of the Ivory Tower to her adopted father. But Anvil chose to reside in a simple tent while the camp was being constructed, and then moved to this stone keep.

Sunny could not complain.

It would have been quite weird to have Neph's father — albeit a fake one — live under one roof with them, especially when they were often getting busy with…

His thoughts were interrupted when his other avatar arrived in front of the stronghold.

Sunny stared at the enigmatic and unmistakably sinister figure clad in an onyx armor, the very air around it suffused with coldness and

arrogance.

At the same time, Sunny stared at a delicate young man wearing a vermilion cloak on top of an elegant black mantle, his handsome face practically screaming of softness and lack of strength.

He remained motionless for a few seconds, and then thought:

'...Edgy idiot.'

'Pampered fool...'

Chapter-1851: Talking to Myself

There was a bit of an eerie pause as Sunny stared at himself from behind the mask.

The Lord of Shadows stared. Master Sunless — or rather, Sir Sunless — paled under his menacing gaze.

…Nephis looked at the two of them with a strange expression.

Eventually, it was Cassie who broke the silence.

"Greetings, Lord Shadow. I don't think we had an opportunity to meet in the last few days… please allow me to express gratitude on behalf of Lady Nephis and the Fire Keepers. Your help in the recent battle, while unexpected, was deeply appreciated."

Sunny turned his cold gaze to her.

He remained silent for a few moments, then said evenly:

"There is no reason to thank me... I was just attracted by the smell of slaughter. Who can resist the beautiful fragrance of bloodshed?"

The Fire Keepers seemed more than a little troubled by his strange words. Sunny spared them a glance, then lowered his head slightly.

"Greetings to you as well, Lady Nephis, Lady Cassia."

Then, he looked at himself coldly.

Was now a good time to establish a distinction between the Lord of Shadows and Master Sunless?

It wouldn't hurt...

He asked evenly:

"And who might this be?"

Nephis blinked a couple of times.

She seemed a little puzzled by the situation. Not only did her suitor possess several incarnations, but two of them were even having a conversation right in front of her. More than that... the conversation did not seem especially friendly!

Sunny himself was a bit confused about the nature of his peculiar existence, so Nephis must have been positively perplexed.

Her attempts to hide her puzzlement behind the usual impassive expression... were quite cute.

He smiled behind the mask.

"Oh… this is Master Sunless, an enchanter employed by the Fire Keepers. Sir Sunless, this is Saint Shadow. A Transcendent warrior of great renown, one of the champions of the Sword Army."

Sunny stared at himself some more, then shrugged dismissively.

"An enchanter? Never heard of him. He must not be very good."

Hearing the Lord of Shadow say that, Master Sunless smiled.

His smile was a little forced, though…

He said politely:

"Really? Ah, but I have heard of you."

Nephis was alternating between looking at them with a hint of bafflement in her eyes.

The Lord of Shadow glared silently.

"What did you hear, and from whom?"

Sunny's smile widened a little.

"I think I heard it from Saint Athena? She mentioned that you must

be terribly hideous behind that mask."

The Fire Keepers held their breaths. Nephis seemed to have suddenly remembered that conversation and closed her eyes with a subtle wince.

Cassie did not show a reaction, but it looked like she was trying to suppress a laugh.

The Lord of Shadows lingered for a moment, then scoffed.

"That woman certainly does not sound like a handful. She has never seen my face, and yet she sings me praises."

With that, he turned away and walked into the gates of the stronghold without looking back.

Sunny, Nephis, Cassie, and the Fire Keepers were left behind in tense silence. The coldness left behind by the Lord of Shadows was slow to dissipate.

After a few moments, one of the Fire Keepers patted Sunny on the shoulder and gave him a thumbs up.

"I admire you, Sir Sunless. You truly are a brave man! I would have never dared to talk back to that devil."

Another nodded.

"True. That guy is beyond creepy. And he stared at our lady like a wolf every time they meet… good job, Sir Sunless!"

A third one sighed.

"Still, try not to antagonize him. He is immensely powerful, even among Saints. It's better not to make an enemy out of someone like him…"

Sunny coughed.

'How come I am both pleased with and offended by their nonsense?'

"Ah, yes… I'll try not to, next time…"

Nephis, meanwhile, was looking at them in confusion.

"...Huh? What do you mean, stares like a wolf?"

The Fire Keepers glanced at each other.

"Sorry to tell you this, my lady, but I think you're the only one who has not noticed. The way he looks at you, it's… you know, as if he wants to gobble you up…"

She hesitated for a few moments, seemingly unsure how to respond. Eventually, she asked:

"You think he's a cannibal?"

Sunny struggled between the impulse to cover his face with a hand and the desire to give her a hug. He wasn't one to point fingers, in that regard, but really… how could she be so adorably clueless?

'I mean, she can literally sense people's desire!'

One of the Fire Keepers coughed.

"No, that's not… anyway, why are we gossiping about the Lord of Shadows? We have Master Sunless right here. Unlike some people, he's a perfect gentleman, and always maintains proper decorum when gazing at our lady."

Another nodded.

"Yeah! If anything, it's our lady that stares at him like a wolf…"

Realizing that he said something wrong, the Fire Keeper fell silent and cleared his throat.

"Well… aren't we going to be late to the war council? L—let us proceed post-haste…"

Nephis gave Sunny a curious look and then smiled with a corner of her mouth.

"Alright. Let's go."

When the Fire Keepers headed for the entrance, she fell back, waited until the two of them were a few steps behind the others, and whispered into his ear:

"So… you want to gobble me up, huh…"

Sunny made his best effort not to trip.

After maintaining silence for a few moments and regaining his composure, he smiled pleasantly and asked:

"...Why? Are you on the menu?"

Nephis studied him silently, then chuckled and hastened her steps, leaving him without an answer.

His expression crumpled a little.

'No, but I really want to know...'

Walking into the stronghold, Sunny touched his ear and let out a heavy sigh.

Sometimes, he really wished that everyone were beholden to the same Flaw as he was.

Chapter-1852: Champions of Valor

Sunny, as the Lord of Shadows, reached the council chamber before his original body did.

The room was not quite as impressive as the hall where the King of Swords had gathered all the Saints before the war, but it was also quite spacious. The walls were built from grey stone and adorned with vermilion tapestries, and there was a round table in the middle of the chamber, with forty-two chairs positioned around it. An elaborate enchanted chandelier shone with a cold glow above.

There were already plenty of people gathered inside, and all of them turned to look when Sunny walked in. The Lord of Shadows was still a mystery to most of them, and although the rumors of his fearsome power had already spread far and wide, few knew what to make of him.

Mostly, they treated him with a mix of respect and wariness.

He graced them with an indifferent gaze, then walked to the table. No one had taken their seat yet, since the king was not present. Ignoring the unspoken convention, Sunny chose a random chair and sat down.

'...Pathetic.'

His Shadow Chair was superior to this pitiful thing in all regards.

Hidden behind the mask, he secretly studied the people who had been summoned to attend the war council.

There were many Masters and a few Awakened here, but they were mostly meant to observe the discussion and provide insight if any of

the true decision-makers had a question having to do with their expertise. The people of real importance were the Saints, and they were the ones Sunny was curious about.

Most of them hailed from the vassal clans, while some were retained by Valor. Several were members of the royal clan's branch families, as well, albeit not many.

The Sword Army possessed slightly more than forty Transcendent warriors. It was less than the Song Domain had, but the Saints of Valor were forged from tougher steel… or at least that was what the public believed. They had more renown, a longer history, and had accomplished more incredible feats.

However, Sunny was doubtful that they were truly superior to the Transcendent warriors of the Song Army. After all, some of the strongest Saints he knew of were those that few people had ever heard about or cared to pay attention to. So, he had a feeling that the champions of the Queen of Worms would give their enemies a nasty shock when the two armies finally clashed in battle.

Which was not to say that the people gathered in the chamber weren't outstanding in every regard. A Saint was a Saint, after all… even now that Transcendents were somewhat divided into tiers, everyone understood that those tiers only differentiated between various levels of absolute excellence.

He saw a few familiar faces, of course.

There was Morgan, the Princess of War. The sharpest sword of her father's kingdom. The enchanting beauty was clad in black armor, leaning on a wall as she studied the room with a hint of amusement in her vivid vermilion eyes.

There was Nephis, Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan. Even among these legendary figures, she was treated with a hint of veneration — both because of her family and because of her own accomplishments. Sunny knew how tyrannical her power was better than anyone.

Looking at the two princesses, Sunny had a sudden thought. He found

it ironic there were seven Saints among the girls Ki Song had adopted, while Anvil only had two Transcendent children… and out of those two, one was now fighting on the side of the enemy, while his place was taken by the daughter of a man the Sovereigns had most likely killed.

'That's one messed-up family tree.'

He continued to study the gathered Saints.

There was Cassie, the blind seer. People paid attention to her because of her startling beauty and quiet demeanor, but few understood how dangerous she was. Most knew her as a competent advisor of the royal clan, while some treated her with subtle reverence that was often afforded to oracles. But since she was not too accomplished as a warrior, no one held her in truly high regard.

Then, there was Sunny himself — the Lord of Shadows. People seemed to have various opinions about him, but everyone agreed that he was an extremely formidable combatant. Still, there was a certain feeling of distance between him and the rest of the gathered Saints, as if they were not entirely ready to put their trust in a stranger.

That was because his position was somewhat unique — unlike the rest of them, he had not sworn loyalty to the King of Swords, and was therefore more of a mercenary than a true comrade.

Some distance away, Sunny noticed Saint Tyris. He saw her recently, so he was not too surprised by the fact that she had not changed at all in the last four years. Sky Tide had always had a stern, but strong presence — now, however, everyone seemed to treat her with an extra bit of respect. After all, she was one of the most important strategic assets in this war.

Strangely enough, the man standing next to her had not changed that much, either. He was tall and rugged, with broad shoulders and an easy bearing. His hair and beard were the color of straw, while his eyes were piercingly blue. There was a blue scarf wrapped carelessly around his neck… Roan of White Feather had grown even more handsome after becoming a Saint.

Together, they made for a beautiful pair.

Awakened Telle was standing behind her parents. Sunny was pleased to see the [Belated Apology] on Roan's right forearm — it seemed that her father really liked her gift.

'I'm glad.'

On the opposite side of the chamber, a gallant man in lustrous armor was waiting calmly for the meeting to start. He was Sir Gilead, the Summer Knight — a man whose loyalty and noble character were a legend in and of themselves. He was known for his straightforward nature, embodying qualities such as honor, valiance, and devotion.

Although… after spending some time with the man in the Nightmare Desert, Sunny suspected that there was more to Sir Gilead than blind loyalty. In any case, Summer Knight was one of the strongest and most renowned Transcendent warriors of the old generation. He was, more or less, the personification of what people thought a Saint should be.

Having someone like that fighting by one's side was quite reassuring in a dire war.

These were all the gathered Transcendents Sunny knew personally.

However, there were a few more that he instantly recognized from hearing about them here and there.

There was a dashing man wearing a beautifully decorated suit of golden armor with floral motifs in the accents. He was Saint Rivalen of Aegis Rose, also known as Shield Wall — a distinguished knight known for his gallant demeanor and stalwart character.

There was also an elegant older gentleman leaning on a black cane. He was Jest of the Dagonet clan — a former member of the cohort led by the founder of Clan Valor and one of the most experienced Awakened of the Sword Army. Among other things, Saint Jest was known for his peculiar True Name… Not So Funny Anymore.

Sunny really didn't know what to make of that fact, however, he was quite curious about the older Saint. They shared the bitter fate of

having an extremely weird name, after all.

There were a few others, as well…

However, before Sunny could properly study them, the King of Swords arrived.

The war council was about to begin.

Chapter-1853: The King's Speech

When the king entered, everyone in the chamber straightened… everyone except for Sunny, naturally, who was the only person sitting comfortably on a wooden chair. Anvil spared him a short glance — which was heavy enough to make Sunny pale behind the mask — and took his seat calmly.

Once the King of Swords was seated, the rest of the Saints took their places behind the round table. Because of its peculiar shape, everyone here seemed to be an equal… however, that equality was merely an illusion. Anvil did not do anything, and yet his suffocating superiority was painfully apparent.

Consequently, those who sat closest to him were above the rest. Morgan sat to his right, while Nephis sat to his left. As for Sunny himself, he was almost on the other side of the table.

At the same time, he was standing near the wall with the rest of the Fire Keepers. The Masters and a few Awakened who had been invited to participate in the war council did not get a spot behind the table.

There were a few moments of silence before Anvil's deep, strangely enthralling voice resonated in the stone chamber. He spoke evenly and plainly, in a strangely calm tone — as if what he was talking about was a mundane matter, not a war that would shape the future of humanity… or maybe even destroy it.

"Welcome, warriors of the Sword Domain. We have carved out a piece of this cursed land and established a fortress atop the ancient bones of a dead deity. Our blades are sharp, and our will is triumphant… for now. The forces of Song have had a hard time achieving what we had achieved with relative ease, but there is no wisdom in belittling their valor.

Those who underestimate the enemy are destined to fall. The cost of

arrogance is death."

He gazed at them coldly and continued in an indifferent tone:

"There is no one in the world who knows Ki Song, the Queen of Worms, better than I do. So, I tell you this: there is no end to the insidious schemes woven by that woman. You should prepare yourself to taste bitterness as her machinations unfold. However, I also promise you this — at the end of it all, we will taste the sweetness of victory."

Hearing those words, Sunny couldn't help but sigh.

At that moment, he suddenly realized how tragic this war must have seemed to the rest of humanity — for reasons entirely different from the ones he himself had considered before.

Anvil said that there was no one in the world who knew Ki Song better than him, and it was most likely true. Sunny was used to thinking about these two as nebulous and sinister figures — as tyrants of immense power who secretly controlled the fate of humanity. The Sovereigns.

But they had been mere mortals before attaining Supremacy — Awakened warriors no different from him. More than that, they had been members of the same cohort.

So, this was a bitter war between two people who had once braved the horrors of the Nightmare Spell together, and fought side by side in the depths of hell. It was no different from Sunny raising an army against Cassie, to kill her and take her kingdom for himself.

'It's actually… quite sad.'

These people had been the hope of humanity once. Now… the Smile of Heaven was gone. Broken Sword was dead, as well. Asterion was who knew where, and the last two were determined to destroy each other.

It made Sunny wonder what would happen to his own cohort in the future.

He could not know the future, of course… but he did know that, at the very least, they would never end up as the Sovereigns. Not the least of all because the Sovereigns were there, in front of them, as a cautionary tale — without their appalling example, Sunny and his companions might very well have unknowingly ended up becoming them.

He inhaled deeply and briefly glanced at Nephis.

The King of Swords, meanwhile, continued:

"Now that we have established a foothold in Godgrave, we must persist into its depths. The next stage of our campaign will be both perilous and vital. Fortunately… I am here. I am with you, so who can be against you?"

Those were big words, but he was also someone who could speak them without sounding boastful.

After that, Anvil succinctly explained the goals looming over the Sword Army. Sunny ignored the flowery words and listened only to the underlying message that the Sovereign of Valor wanted to relay.

Fundamentally, the Domain War was a clash between the King of Swords and the Queen of Worms. It would reach its culmination when the two of them faced each other in battle, and end when one of them killed the other.

The key to gaining a decisive advantage in that final confrontation were the Citadels scattered across Godgrave. Possessing more of them would allow one of the Sovereigns to manifest their Domain more thoroughly, and make that Domain stronger.

Therefore, the two great armies were merely tools for taking control of the Citadels.

Valor was already ahead of Song in that regard, and there seemed to be nothing that could prevent them from widening the gap. With their Sovereign present in Godgrave, the task of subjugating lost Citadels would become much easier.

Which was not to say that it would be easy.

Although the King of Swords could already manifest his Domain here, his power was still contained in the immediate area around the Ivory Island. That allowed the camp of his army an incredible degree of protection against external threats, and made the task of venturing into the subterranean jungle less daunting.

But the warriors of Valor still had to brave the incinerating expanse of the surface and the dark depths of the Hollows to uncover and conquer the overgrown Citadels.

As for where those Citadels were located…

At some point, Anvil paused for a few moments and shifted his gaze to the masked figure sitting on the other side of the round table.

His voice was calm when he said:

"Regarding this matter, I will ask the person who knows most about Godgrave to give us an explanation. Saint Shadow… if you will."

Sunny lingered for a bit, then sighed and leaned forward a little.

"Sure. Let's see… for a godforsaken hell unfit to be inhabited by humans, Godgrave has a surprising number of Citadels…"

Chapter-1854: The Shadow's Response

The King of Swords certainly had a commanding presence, but when the Lord of Shadows spoke, it was hard not to pay attention to him as well.

Both possessed a cold indifference to them, but while Anvil's voice was calm and regal, Sunny's was sinister and dark.

The impenetrable darkness nestling in the eyes of his ferocious mask only made him seem more eerie and captivating.

Leaning forward a little, he spoke in an even tone…

Or rather, he pretended to. In truth, he simply activated the enchantment of the Extraordinary Rock and allowed it to repeat what he had spoken aloud earlier, before summoning Weaver's Mask.

"There are no more Citadels to be conquered on the surface, and I can't say anything about the sea of ash below — even for me, that place is too dire. However, there are several strongholds hidden in the Hollows, which I have scouted out extensively in the last few years."

Sunny pretended to pause for a moment, then moved his hand subtly.

Following his command, shadows crawled from the floor and flowed onto the round table like a stream of darkness. There, they solidified and manifested into a flawless model of the dead deity — a trick he had used once before in front of the Fire Keepers.

Soon, it was as if a large black skeleton was laying on the wooden surface of the council table.

There was a wave of whispers in the stone chamber. Sunny allowed it to pass, and then continued coldly with the help of the Extraordinary Rock:

"I know the approximate location of four Citadels. One is situated in the western part of the Collarbone Hollow, and is the closest one to the war camp of the Song Army. Taking it would, without a doubt, become a priority to them, since they need to conquer a Citadel desperately.

The second is located in the central part of the Breastbone Hollow, at an equal distance from both of the war camps — considering our advantage, we should be able to reach it first."

Sunny leaned back and crossed his arms.

"The third is situated far below, in the spine of the dead god. Reaching that one would be much more challenging… all of Godgrave is hell, but the great Spine Hollow is one of the most dreadful parts of that hell, by far. The fourth Citadel is the furthest, and is hidden all the way in the far south, in one of the two Femur Hollows."

He lingered for a few moments, and then commanded the Extraordinary Rock to speak the last prepared lines:

"I… suspect that there is a fifth Citadel, as well. If there is, it is situated in the skull of the dead deity. However, that place is far too harrowing. I have never dared approach it, and I suggest that none of you try, either. Whatever is hidden there should never be disturbed by humans."

Sunny had indeed never ventured close to the colossal skull of the dead god. Even though it could be seen from anywhere in Godgrave, propped up by the mountains and staring at the ancient corpse with its enormous, empty eyes, it was the last place he ever wanted to explore.

Sure, the ancient darkness drowning the great chasms of the skeleton's eyes was nebulous and alluring, promising mysteries beyond his imagination — and, maybe, keys to unimaginable power.

Who knew what could be hidden in the head of a dead deity? Maybe it was the secret of its death. But no matter what the secret was, it had to be something of tremendous importance.

And yet, Sunny felt it in his own bones that trying to enter the colossal skull would result in a death more thorough than any he had brushed against before. He wouldn't be surprised if there was an Unholy Titan dwelling there — and he was not ready to face an Unholy Titan.

Simply witnessing a creature like that could very well cause Sunny's mind to shatter and his soul to collapse.

His final words were met by a tense silence. The gathered Saints studied the black skeleton laying on the table with somber expressions.

Eventually, Morgan asked in a subdued tone:

"Saint Shadow… how sure are you that these locations you've discovered are indeed Citadels, and not simply ancient ruins?"

Sunny shrugged.

"As sure as I can be."

In truth, he was reasonably certain, but there was always room for doubt. He had never explored the interiors of the supposed Citadels, since there were immensely powerful abominations guarding each of them. But he had learned enough to believe in his judgment.

Hearing his response, Morgan smiled.

"How fortunate it is that my sister managed to convince you to share your knowledge, then."

The King of Swords gazed at him once more, then spoke evenly:

"The course of action is clear. For now, it is too perilous to send our soldiers into the Hollows. We need to proceed slowly by conquering the surface and make our way to the center of the Breastbone Plain. From there, we will launch an assault on the Citadel situated below

it."

That was just as expected. During this first stage of the war, both armies would be preoccupied with the laborious task of subjugating the surface of Godgrave. They would move deeper inland, eradicating the jungle and mapping out the major fissures in the ancient bone.

Then, fortified outposts would be built near the fissures to stop the jungle from crawling out of the Hollows once again, thus slowly expanding the zone of human control.

It seemed like a titanic task, to conquer the colossal skeleton, one crack in the bone at a time. But Sunny was not stupid enough to underestimate the tenacity of the human pioneers.

All regions of the Dream Realm had once seemed impregnable. And yet, humans had slowly conquered them, one after the other — Clan Valor in particular was responsible for subjugating the vast territory between the Twilight Sea and the Hollow Mountains. The story of their expansionist crusades was the stuff of legends in and of itself.

And while humanity had never conquered a Death Zone before, its expedition forces had never been as vast, and had never been led by rulers of the Supreme Rank, either.

So, Sunny had no doubt that the surface of Godgrave would fall into human hands eventually. Perhaps it would take many months, and cost countless lives. But the result had already been decided — the Sovereigns had willed it, and so, their wills would reshape the world to fit their ambitions.

He looked at the King of Swords, and at the same time, the king looked at him.

Anvil remained silent for a moment, then said without any emotion in his powerful voice:

"While most of us will be paving the road south, you will have another task, Saint Shadow."

Sunny raised an eyebrow behind the mask.

"Oh?"

The King of Swords shifted his gaze to the black skeleton, looking intently at the spot where the war camp of the Song Army was supposed to be.

When he spoke, his tone contained authority that could not be denied:

"You will venture to disrupt the enemy's attempts to conquer the Western Citadel. The location of your own stronghold is quite convenient for launching raids... so, I expect you to deliver good results."

Chapter-1855: Sudden Assignment

Considering how fast the road to Godgrave had been built, Rain really should not have been surprised — but the warcamp of the Song Army was being constructed at astonishing speed.

Just a few days had passed since they made it to the collarbone of the dead deity, and yet it already resembled a city. Of course, it was mostly a tent city, considering how hard it was to deliver building materials to this dreadful land.

The lack of materials was not the only problem they faced, either. There was something much more dire slowing down the construction — the fact that the camp was endlessly besieged from all sides by the vile abominations of the scarlet jungle.

The jungle might have been pushed back, but it did not disappear. Even after being reduced to ash, it was already crawling back from the cracks in the ancient bone. The sun-bleached surface of the plain was covered by red moss and vermilion grass once again, and one could see the jungle grow and spread at astonishing speed with a naked eye.

The soldiers of the Song Domain had spent each day battling the constant onslaught of Nightmare Creatures, stalling them until the fortifications were completed.

Luckily, most of those Nightmare Creatures were newborns. They were immensely powerful and absolutely lethal, but at least the Awakened could contend with them… albeit just barely. When something more terrible emerged from below the ground or was allowed to grow truly dangerous by devouring other abominations, the Ascended officers and Transcendent generals took to the battlefield.

The Seventh Legion had participated in defending the camp, as well. Rain had lost count of how many arrows she let loose. It was a good thing that she was wearing the Puppeteers Shroud — its bracer, made from lusterless black leather, was still in one piece. A mundane one would have been already shredded by the string of her powerful bow.

Tamar, Ray, and Fleur had also participated in the battles, earning more than a few scratches here and there. Luckily, Saint Seishan was an experienced leader and stellar commander, so the casualties suffered by the Seventh Legion were among the lowest among all divisions of the Song Army.

Still, their first week in Godgrave had been a horrid nightmare.

...Invading a Death Zone was just as harrowing of an endeavor as it sounded.

There were no nights here, so counting days was a bit hard. Nevertheless, Rain was more or less sure that it was currently early morning. She splashed some water on her face in the washroom attached to the barracks and was in the process of preparing breakfast for the cohort when a subtle voice suddenly resounded from her shadow:

"Rise and shine!"

Rain turned her head and stared at the shadow.

She was rarely alone these days, and there were many powerful people in the camp. So, there were few opportunities for her to talk to her teacher — they had only exchanged a few words since the army entered Godgrave.

Rain could barely remember the last time she spoke to him so little. She missed her teacher's company… although, of course, she would never admit it aloud.

"What happened?"

He would not have risked exposing his presence without a reason.

Her teacher sighed.

"I won't be able to accompany you for the next few hours. So, be careful… and don't stand out."

Rain frowned.

"What? Why?"

There was no answer. Instead, Tamar — who had woken up even earlier — walked over to the fire, covering a tired yawn with a hand.

"Who are you talking to?"

Rain looked at her, remained silent for a moment, then smiled.

"Just talking to myself."

Tamar shrugged and sat down, then looked at the fire.

There was supposed to be a large kitchen with dedicated staff to feed the legion, but it had not been built yet. So, for now, each cohort was provided with supplies to cook for themselves.

"Are Ray and Fleur still asleep?"

Rain nodded.

Recently, she had been surprised to learn that the other two members of the cohort were an item ever since meeting at the Awakened Academy. They did not show it often — which was understandable, in current circumstances — but the two were more or less inseparable.

Rain's addition to the cohort had saved Tamar from the awkward fate of being the perpetual third wheel.

The Legacy girl sighed.

"Alright. Then, come with me."

Rain raised an eyebrow.

"Huh? Where are we going?"

Tamar rose, swept her hair back, and dusted off the pauldrons of her armor.

"There is a big meeting happening at the command pavilion. Two members of our cohort are supposed to escort Lady Seishan as honor guards. Congratulations... try to look presentable and don't do anything outrageous."

Rain's eyes widened. She took the pot off the fire, placed it on the ground, and hurriedly stood up.

"Wait! Why our cohort?"

The younger girl shrugged.

"Probably as a sign of respect to my father. In any case, I received orders to arrive immediately. There's no time to waste, so let's go."

Rain blinked a couple of times, glanced at her shadow, and then followed Tamar to the center of the Seventh Legion's encampment.

They met the Queen's daughter there. That was the first time Rain happened to be so close to Saint Seishan — she tried very hard not to stare, but it was a bit hard. The woman was just too beautiful, mysterious, and mesmerizing.

And there was a… a presence about her. Rain couldn't quite explain it, but she felt funny near the graceful princess of Song. It was as though a strange sense of calm and tranquility had overcome her.

At the same time, her blood turned cold in her veins, and her tattoo moved slightly, constricting her arm.

Tamar and Lady Seishan exchanged a few words. They seemed to be acquainted with each other, albeit on a very shallow level — which was not surprising, considering their backgrounds. Finally, Tamar introduced Rain to the princess.

Saint Seishan looked at her and smiled elegantly.

"Awakened Rani. I'll be in your care."

Rain felt frozen for a moment, then bowed awkwardly.

"M—my lady."

With that, they headed to the command pavilion, which was situated in the heart of the camp.

As they walked, the wind carried the sounds of battle from the exterior of the encampment. The fighting never really stopped, so Rain had grown somewhat used to it. She still shivered, though, earning a stern look from Tamar.

'What? It's not like you're not having nightmares almost every night, yourself!'

She made an attempt to look calm and fell behind Saint Seishan, playing the role of an honor guard… which was a bit ridiculous, really, considering that the task of protecting a Transcendent was not something an Awakened like her could do.

Soon, they reached the command pavilion — which was a larger tent reinforced with some masonry — and walked inside.

There, Rain almost lost her composure.

'D—damnation!'

The "big meeting" Tamar had mentioned… the Legacy girl seemed to be the queen of understatement!

The diffused sunshine was pouring through the blue fabric of the tent, flooding its interior with cold light. Bathed in it…

Was everyone.

Every Saint of the Song Army, and most of the prominent Masters serving the Queen. There were a few Awakened, as well, most of them escorting their officers like Tamar and Rain were.

Rain had already been overwhelmed from being in proximity to one Saint…

But now, she was looking at dozens of them!

There were other princesses other than Lady Seishan, as well…

She took a shaky breath and barely managed to regain her composure.

However, a moment later, that composure was shattered by a sudden, explosive thought.

'I'm… I'm not going to meet the queen, am I?!'

Chapter-1856: Champions of Song

Saint Seishan did not seem daunted by the astonishing power and status of the people gathered in the command pavilion — which should not have been surprising, really, considering that she was a princess herself.

Rain, however, was overwhelmed. There were close to fifty Transcendent champions around her, and each of them possessed a presence. Some auras were subtle, while some were forceful — they were all undeniable, though, almost making her feel dizzy.

Or drunk, maybe… in any case, it was an intense feeling.

She furtively glanced at Tamar. The Legacy girl was not really showing it, but Rain could tell that she was affected by the wondrous atmosphere of the tent, as well.

They were protected by the calm presence of Saint Seishan, at least. Without it, their state would have been even worse.

Lady Seishan walked across the spacious room with her usual elegant poise, greeting her sisters and vassal Saints gracefully as she went. Somewhat relieved, Rain was finally able to look around.

She regretted it almost immediately.

'Ah… that is simply unfair…'

Everyone around her was chillingly beautiful. It was as if she was in a lavish museum where every sculpture and painting had come alive. She had seen plenty of stunning people before, and was not so bad herself… but surrounded by the nobility of the Song Domain, Rain couldn't help but feel utterly plain.

Judging by Tamar's wistful expression, she felt the same.

'Why am I surprised?'

She was looking at Saints, after all. Competing with a Saint in terms of one's looks was a fool's errand.

Consoling herself that way, she tried to assign the names she had heard to the beautiful faces.

Rain had heard a lot about the most prominent figures of the Domain while living in Ravenheart, of course. She learned more about them from Tamar in the recent weeks, as well. So, they were not complete strangers.

She knew Saint Seishan, of course. The commander of the Seventh Legion was somewhat obscure, and there was little known about her. She had been the last of the seven Transcendent princesses to become a Saint — however, that did not mean that she was weaker or younger than the rest.

It was just that Lady Seishan had spent almost ten years as a Sleeper on the Forgotten Shore. After returning from that ordeal, she attained Transcendence in a fraction of time that the others had required. In fact, it often felt like the rest of the queen's daughters treated her with a lot of respect. Especially those who were still Masters.

Queen Song had more than seven daughters — adopted daughters, of course. It was just that only seven had become Saints so far.

The next person who attracted Rain's attention almost made her stumble.

It was hard not to notice him, considering that there were relatively few men in the command pavilion. The one she couldn't help but stare at was tall, with broad shoulders and narrow thighs, wearing an austere armor with few adornments.

He had a somber look and cold, deep eyes. His face was mature and way… way too handsome. Most importantly, he had tan skin and strange ashen hair.

It was Tamar's dad!

Rain blinked a couple of times, then blushed a little and looked away. The man was at least two decades older than her, but he was also a Saint. She couldn't help but feel a little out of breath, and looked at Tamar with a silent question.

The Legacy girl frowned, then whispered:

"Yes, that is my father."

Rain's eyes widened a little.

'Damn it, Tamar! You didn't tell me that your dad was… was a total smoke show!'

Shaking her head, she tried to distract herself by looking at someone else.

That, as well, was a terrible mistake. Because the first person who caught her eyes was none other than Beastmaster, a woman so breathtaking and tantalizing that there were countless songs written about her.

Even the thin scar that marred her demonically beautiful face did nothing to detract from her beauty. Instead, it only made it more alluring… hypnotic, almost. Impossible to look away from.

Rain knew that Beastmaster had earned that scar somewhere in Antarctica. Awakened did not usually have scars, since their bodies could recover better than those of mundane people, and there were plenty of people with healing Aspects around. The fact that a princess of Song could not erase such a long scar suggested that the wound that had left it was not ordinary.

Nevertheless, Beastmaster wore it well.

Rain barely managed to look away and concentrated on a few other people in the command pavilion.

'Let's see. Silent Stalker, Princess Moonveil, Lonesome Howl … and that must be Revel, the Dark Dancer.'

Those were four of the remaining five Transcendent princesses. The last one was missing, or at least Rain failed to recognize her.

Silent Stalker was strangely unassuming. In fact, it was hard to notice her at all — the woman was standing near the wall of the pavilion, leaning on a support beam and half-hidden in the shadows. There was a silent aura about her, but her calm eyes were focused and attentive. She was wearing a black hunting attire.

Moonveil was delicate and beautiful, with a slender build and a soft, enchanting face. Her hair was white, and her eyes seemed to glimmer with the afterglow of pale moonlight. She wore a modest dress instead of an armor, but Rain could recognize a fellow archer when she saw one.

Lonesome Howl was tall, lithe, and full of barely contained bestial energy. Her handsome face was illuminated by a slight grin, and her eyes were full of cocky confidence. She wore leather trousers and a sleeveless vest, leaving her toned, tan arms exposed.

Lastly… there was Revel, the Dark Dancer, also known as the Lightslayer. She was the first of the Queen's daughters to have Transcended, and therefore somewhat of a senior to the rest.

Her hair was raven-black, and her eyes were like two obsidian gems. With her dark clothes, alabaster skin, and exquisite beauty, she was undeniably striking. As for her character, Rain couldn't tell what the princess was like. All she could see was that there was depth to her gaze, and a subtle coldness to her features.

If Rain had to say anything, though… it was that Lightslayer looked a little forlorn. As if she was missing something that she could never have.

'What a strange thought.'

Just as Rain thought that, Princess Revel suddenly spoke, her slightly husky voice easily resonating across the pavilion:

"Let us begin."

Chapter-1857: Missing Invitation

Lightslayer was sitting at the head of the table. Beastmaster was to her right, while Lady Seishan was to her left. Since Rain and Tamar were escorting the latter, they were standing behind her chair.

The former, meanwhile, used enthralled Nightmare Creatures as her escorts. Two ethereal, ghostly figures were drifting in the air behind her, almost invisible in the pale light of the command pavilion — even knowing that they were subdued by one of the queen's daughters, Rain couldn't help but feel uneasy in their presence.

She was usually in the company of a sinister wraith of her own. Today, however, her teacher had left her alone — no doubt to avoid being sensed by the plethora of Saints gathered here.

…Dark Dancer Revel had come alone.

She gazed at the champions of the Song Army, remained silent for a while, and then spoke in her subtle, husky voice:

"Brothers and sisters, all of you should know the situation. Godgrave is a cruel place, and we have suffered from its cruelty. In the days and months to come, we will suffer more, and we will suffer greatly. There is no mercy to be found under this ruthless sky, and no salvation from the perils that besiege us."

Rain expected that Lightslayer would continue with a "but", but to her surprise, the princess made no attempt to lift the spirits of her comrades. Her rather bleak proclamation simply hung in the air, and the faces of the gathered Saints slowly turned somber.

Rain and Tamar were just close enough to see Revel sparing a short, almost imperceptible glance at Lady Seishan. After receiving a

similarly subtle nod, she smiled coldly.

"What most of you might not know is how the enemy is faring on the other side of the Collarbone Plain. Let me inform you… the enemy is faring well. They have entered Godgrave and established a fortified encampment without suffering any significant losses. Their fortress is impregnable, and they have no shortage of supplies.

They are already moving their forces to carve a path south, aiming to claim a second — or maybe even a third — Citadel."

She paused for a moment, and then added indifferently:

"The reason for the enviable progress of the Sword Army is rather simple. It is because they are protected by their Sovereign, while we are not. The tyrant, King of Swords, is already here in Godgrave. But my mother is still waiting for us to extend her an invitation."

Lightslayer gazed at the Saints and finished in an even tone:

"So, we will dedicate ourselves to conquering a Citadel of our own immediately."

There was a wave of whispers, followed by a tense silence. In that silence, a deep voice resounded, forcing Rain to look at the far end of the table.

"Forgive me for speaking out, my lady…"

The speaker was a man that looked relatively young, but nevertheless made quite an impression. He was tall and had an incredibly powerful build, with muscles so robust that they strained the fabric of his lavish pangolin coat. His skin had a darker hue, and he emanated a feeling of dire physical might.

Rain recognized him easily — the young Saint was rather famous these days, albeit not for a good reason.

He was Dar of the Maharana clan, who had just returned from conquering the Third Nightmare. As such, he was the youngest of all human Saints — or, at least, the most recent. A rejected demand to hand him over to Clan Valor was what had sparked this entire war.

Officially, at least.

Of course, the hypocritical justification the King of Swords had provided seemed quite flimsy even back then. Now that everyone knew that Dar of the Maharana clan had been in the depths of a Nightmare when the assassination attempt on Changing Star happened, it seemed even more preposterous.

The mighty Saint continued soberly:

"Our own situation is not entirely stable, yet. Secure supply chains have yet to be established, and our camp can barely be called a stronghold. The enemy is indeed ahead of us, but what will we achieve by rushing? Won't we just make our disadvantage more dire by plunging head first into a battle that we are not quite ready to fight?"

Rain noticed that the Saint of Sorrow looked at the younger Transcendent with a hint of curiosity… which was the first semblance of emotion that the somber man had shown thus far.

She glanced at Tamar and suppressed a smile.

It was too easy to see where the younger girl's mannerisms had all come from.

In any case, Saint Dar was making a lot of sense. Since he was, Rain almost expected that he would be accused of cowardice, but luckily, none of the people gathered in the command pavilion were fools. They kept quiet, either sharing his opinion or waiting for the daughters of the queen to react.

In the ensuing silence, it was Beastmaster who smiled and said in a beguiling tone:

"You don't have to worry about the enemy's progress. Leave those worries to your queen. Trust in my mother, like you have trusted her thus far, and she shall grant you victory."

Although she was not a biological sister to the Dark Dancer, their voices were strangely alike.

Saint Dar frowned and wanted to say something, but at that moment, the fold covering the entrance to the pavilion moved, and a new figure entered.

A petite young woman walked in, wearing a dark robe. There was a hint of innocence on her lovely face, and a strange calmness in her large, glistening eyes.

In stark contrast to that innocence, however, were heavy drops of blood falling from her slick hands.

Rain tried not to stare.

'The missing princess.'

The last of the seven Transcendent daughters of Ki Song had finally arrived. She was Hel, the Death Singer — one of the most mysterious and revered Saints of the Song Domain.

Despite how ominous she looked, that with fresh blood smeared all across her hands, the young woman was not that sinister. She was a haruspex — or rather, a haruspicina — a diviner who received revelations by inspecting the entrails of sacrificial beasts.

The gathering grew quiet when the oracle appeared and slowly made her way to where Lightslayer, Beastmaster, and Lady Seishan were seated.

Rain frowned a little.

'Come to think of it… how come I don't know Saint Seishan's True Name?'

She had to have one. But, to Rain's knowledge, no one had ever spoken it aloud.

Death Singer, meanwhile, reached the head of the table, leaned down, and whispered something into her sister's ear.

Lightslayer smiled.

"Responding to your question, Saint Dar. There is indeed not much

sense in rushing into battle. That is why we will split our forces and rush into two battles, instead…"

Chapter-1858: Precipice

Princess Hel had not spoken after whispering something in Lightslayer's ear. She took her seat and remained silent, the blood continuing to drip from her hands to the floor.

The war council continued for a while, since there were a lot of minor issues that had to be relayed, considered, and ironed out. Rain listened with rapt attention, knowing that what was being discussed in the command pavilion would directly impact, and maybe even decide, her fate.

And, in a way, it did.

It really seemed like the Sword Army was on a sure path to overwhelming the forces of Song — the aggressor that had initiated this vile conflict was far ahead, and widening the gap with each day. Which hardly seemed fair.

However, the queen's daughters were strangely calm about the entire situation. Instead of maintaining caution and employing a conservative strategy, like one would when dealing with a superior enemy, they chose to act with an unsettling boldness.

Eventually, the meeting was over, and everyone who had gathered in the command pavilion hurried outside. There was a lot for them to do.

Dar of the Maharana clan left with a dark smile on his lips. The Saint of Sorrow spared his daughter a glance, nodded curtly, and walked outside with the same bleak expression. The daughters of Ki Song soon followed.

However, Lady Seishan remained motionless. So did Beastmaster and Lightslayer.

Eventually, the three sisters were the only ones left in the command pavilion — not counting Rain, Tamar, and the wraiths hovering behind Beastmaster.

It seemed like they wanted to discuss something in private.

Tamar cleared her throat.

"Should we give you privacy, Lady Seishan?"

Their commander looked back and smiled.

"No need, young Tamar. Just make sure to stay quiet."

She didn't specify whether they were meant to stay quiet during the following discussion or about it. In any case, Rain wasn't going to talk.

She had already been forced to flee Ravenheart because of knowing too much.

Lightslayer looked at Tamar, then reached back and pulled up the hood of her dark mantle. A moment later, her eyes were hidden in deep shadow, and a small sigh escaped from her lips.

"Will you two be able to handle what needs to be done?"

The three sisters would soon be in command of the split army.

Beastmaster would remain in the warcamp with a part of Song forces. Her task was to finish the construction of the fortress while defending it from the onslaught of Nightmare Creatures.

Saint Seishan, meanwhile, would lead an expedition force toward the location where one of the Citadels of Godgrave was supposedly located. Death Singer, the diviner, would lead them across the surface of the ancient bone until they reached a broad area above their target.

From there, the elites of the expedition force would venture into the Hollows and conquer the Citadel. The task seemed absolutely lethal, and victory was not certain. However, Lady Seishan remained calm

and poised, not showing even the smallest hint of hesitation.

It was as if there was no question whether she would take the Citadel, only how soon, and at what cost.

If she did prevail, however… Queen Song would be able to manifest her Domain in Godgrave, and their position would not seem so hopeless anymore.

The last sister, Lightslayer, would neither remain in the camp nor join the expedition force. Instead, she would attempt to do… something.

Rain wasn't quite sure what, because the details had not been shared with anyone. All that the Dark Dancer had said was that she would venture to slow down the enemy's progress. She was not going to command any troops, but she would take a few Saints with her.

As Rain was wondering what, exactly, Lightslayer was planning to do, Saint Seishan answered her question:

"It's alright, Revel. We'll be fine. You don't have to worry."

The raven-haired beauty looked at her and smiled darkly.

"When have I ever worried? Ask anyone. In the ten years that you were missing, I haven't worried once."

Beastmaster laughed.

"How callous."

Lady Seishan shook her head.

"If you want to be worried about someone, worry about yourself. Out of the three of us, your task is the most uncertain."

Lightslayer looked at her from beneath her hood.

"What's uncertain about it? Howl, Silence, and Moon are coming with. So is the Saint of Sorrow. You know that we are prepared."

Lady Seishan lingered for a moment.

"Everything else is fine, but the Lord of Shadows is an unknown. We don't know much about him. There are no traces… it is as if he conjured himself out of thin air, like a daemon."

Her sister smiled darkly.

"Then he can disappear into thin air as well."

Rain was staring forward, pretending to be a dutiful guard.

There was a lot on her mind, though.

'Appeared out of thin air…'

Wasn't that how her teacher had appeared a few years ago?

She tried not to frown.

She did not know a lot about the Lord of Shadows, but he and her teacher were strangely alike. They both commanded shadows, for one… there were other similarities, too. She was half-convinced that they were the same person, even.

However, her teacher had been by her side every day for the last four years, while the Lord of Shadows had been in Godgrave all that time. Well, at least he had been there for two winter solstices in a row, rescuing stray Sleepers. Her teacher had never left her side, and they had been together on those solstices as well.

So… what?

Was the Lord of Shadows a similar existence to her teacher? A disembodied shadow that possessed great and strange powers, pursuing mysterious goals? Were they, perhaps, comrades? Or at least had come from the same source?

'I should ask Teacher.'

He would probably answer with some ridiculous nonsense, though.

At that moment, Beastmaster shifted, looked at Lady Seishan, and asked somberly:

"What about the other? Has the Prince of Nothing sent any news?"

Lady Seishan lingered for a while, then smiled elegantly.

"Oh, yes."

For some reason, her elegant smile suddenly looked rather sinister.

Her pleasant, velvet voice resounded softly in the empty command pavilion:

"…He is about to start."

Chapter-1859: Untold

Far away and beyond reach, a vast expanse of rolling water was glistening under the starlit sky. Black clouds were flowing like tattered banners, torn apart by the violent winds.

Colossal waves were rising and falling, each taller than a fortress wall. Countless bolts of lightning were flashing, branching as they struck the restless surface of the water.

Illuminated by the veil of lightning that connected its numerous masts to the stars, a titanic ship was waging a war against the storm.

The ship was at least a kilometer across from port to starboard, but seemed narrow because of its great length. Its ancient hull was made of wood, but had no seams — it was as if the entire vessel had been created by hollowing out a single branch that spanned more than a dozen kilometers from end to end.

Although, if there was a tree with branches so immense, severing one would not have been an easy feat. Fashioning a ship out of it would not have been a task for mortals, either.

The titanic ship was like a city in and of itself. There were dozens of decks, beautiful palaces and tall pagodas built on its surface, and great mysteries hiding in its boundless holds. There were wild groves, rushing streams, and deep lakes.

And people.

This was Night Garden, the great Citadel of the House of Night.

Despite the furious force of the storm, which would have destroyed any other vessel, the Night Garden was moving through turbulent waters with daunting, unstoppable ease. The colossal waves were cut apart by its proud bow and broke powerlessly against its

indestructible hull. The branching bolts of lightning struck its masts and were absorbed by them, empowering the ancient ship.

The terrible abominations that rose from unfathomable depths from time to time to attack the great vessel were consumed by it, becoming parts of its living hull.

Even in a region of the Dream Realm as strange and deadly as the Stormsea, the people populating the Night Garden were relatively safe.

Tonight, however…

Human blood was spilled on its deck, flowing like a river.

The blood was absorbed by the ancient ship, as well.

"What… what are you doing…"

Close to the bow of the ship, an old man was crawling across the deck, leaving a bloody trail in his wake. His voice was full of pain, confusion, and sorrowful disbelief.

There was a younger man following him with unhurried steps, holding a bloodied knife in his hand.

There was no emotion on the younger man's face, and no mercy in his eyes.

He shrugged.

"You didn't have to be stubborn, old man. This could all have been avoided."

Behind him, a desperate scream tore apart the howling of the storm, and then stopped abruptly. There were more screams further away, some of them full of fear, some of them full of rage.

But with each minute, there were less and less of them.

The old man gritted his teeth.

"You've lost your mind!"

His killer sighed, then rubbed his face tiredly with a bloodied hand. For a moment, he seemed incredibly exhausted, a spark of some unknown emotion finally finding its way into his eyes.

"Have I? Ah, I'll admit… there might be some merit to your argument."

With that, he leaned down, grabbed the old man by the ankle, and dragged him back while raising the knife.

"...But then again, who hasn't?"

The old man looked at him with horror.

His lips trembled.

"You! You are not my son!"

The younger man froze for a moment, then suddenly chuckled.

The hint of emotion drained from his eyes, leaving only terrible coldness.

"Aye. I've heard that one before…"

The knife fell down like the guillotine's blade.

The storm raged on.

***

[Wake up, Sunny!]

Sunny couldn't help but flinch, overcome by a strong sense of déjà vu.

There was a voice in his head, telling him to wake up… thankfully, it was not the voice of the Nightmare Spell. It was Cassie's voice, albeit at that moment, the two sounded eerily similar.

'Why is she…'

He was confused for a moment, but then remembered that not everyone was truly familiar with the strange nature of his existence. His original body in Godgrave was asleep, so Cassie must have assumed that she needed to wake him.

His other two incarnations, however, very rarely slept — so, there was no need for her to bother.

[What is it?]

There were a few moments of silence, as if Cassie was confused. Then, she responded, a sense of urgency in her voice:

[You need to return to the camp.]

Standing in the great hall of the Nameless Temple, Sunny frowned.

The avatar hiding in Rain's shadow was momentarily disturbed, as well.

When was the last time Cassie had lost her composure like that?

He could barely remember.

[What are you talking about? I am in the camp.]

She answered almost immediately:

[The Lord of Shadow has to return. Something strange is happening.]

Sunny looked at the gates of the temple.

It was a long way from the southern edge of the dead god's breastbone to the eastern reaches of the collarbone. He could make it relatively fast by abusing Shadow Step, but it would still take considerable time, and drain his reserves of essence.

Still, Cassie would not have called him back without a reason.

[What exactly is happening?]

There was a moment of silence, and then she answered in a tense voice:

[The House of Night is on the move. The king has summoned Nephis and Morgan. I'll tell you more the moment I learn it, so hurry… no, wait…]

Cassie hesitated a little.

[There is no time. Return to NQSC. I'll pick you up and bring you back to the camp. That will be faster.]

Sunny raised an eyebrow behind the mask.

'So, they finally decided to act. I wondered when they would.'

He had a suspicion that the House of Night would not remain on the sidelines of the war despite their desperate efforts to claim neutrality… a suspicion strong enough that it could very well be called certainty. He had known that something like this would happen ever since that clash with the Skinwalker outside Ravenheart.

Cassie and Nephis knew, as well. In fact, they had accounted for this eventuality in their plans. At the end of the day, it did not really matter to them which side gained an advantage in the war — because, eventually, both sides would have to be destroyed.

But Cassie still sounded tense.

Why?

Suddenly, he regretted his caution. Maybe he should have tried to infiltrate the command pavilion of the Song Army, after all. Or pressed Rain to share military secrets with her usually disinterested teacher.

'There is only one way to find out.'

Actually, there were many ways to find out. But that was neither here nor there.

Frowning deeply, Sunny reached into his soul and pulled on the tether.

Chapter-1860: Turn of Fortune

There were plumes of smoke rising above NQSC.

Leaning against a dirty wall in the depths of the outskirts, Sunny looked at the towering black pillars silently. A police PTV sped by, flooding the deep darkness of the night with bright lights of the blaring siren. He hid himself deeper in the shadows and crossed his arms.

'Several locations, most of them close to the city center.'

Fires were not a rarity in NQSC, but not on that scale, and not in the affluent districts at the heart of the city.

What had happened? Was the agreement to leave the war out of the waking world broken, already?

[How far are you?]

There was a moment of silence.

[Less than a minute.]

Soon, a luxurious PTV screeched to a halt in front of him. The passenger door opened, and Cassie stepped out of the vehicle, looking a little disheveled. She remained motionless for a few moments, then turned in his direction, winced, and hurriedly smoothed her hair.

Sunny emerged from the shadows and walked over.

"What the hell is happening?"

For now, he was wearing the mask he had fashioned himself. So, it was the only opportunity to have an honest conversation with Cassie — once they reached Godgrave, he would have to don Weaver's Mask in order to keep his secrets.

"Was the compound of Clan Valor attacked? The Dream Gate relay? Storage facilities?"

She hesitated briefly, then shook her head.

"It's all the House of Night. Their strongholds across the city have gone up in flames. It's total chaos."

Sunny was surprised.

"...They were attacked?"

A deep frown creased Cassie's delicate brow.

"For now, it seems like infighting."

'What?'

It took him a moment to process the information. The members of the House of Night were fighting among each other?

Was there a schism among the leaders of the great clan? Unlike Song and Valor, which were monoliths held together by shared blood and familial bonds, the House of Night had been born from an alliance of a dozen Legacy clans — a decision dictated by the meteoric rise of the two great families, to a large extent.

So, he could entertain the idea of internal strife resulting in an open conflict during these trying times.

However, something did not smell right…

Sunny had a few ideas about who could have been behind the whole mess, but he was not certain.

Cassie sent the PTV away and then faced him. Her expression was a little strange.

"There are… defectors."

He raised an eyebrow behind the mask.

"Where are they defecting to?"

The blind seer seemed troubled.

"Several prominent figures of the House of Night appeared at the gates of Clan Valor's stronghold here, in NQSC. Bloodied and with their family members in tow. They are… asking for an asylum."

Now that was simply bizarre.

Sunny felt troubled, as well.

"Where are they now?"

Cassie offered him her hand.

"They are passing through the Dream Gate. The king will negotiate with them — or interrogate them, depending on the situation — personally. Everyone worth anything were summoned back to the camp. The situation might turn more dire than we had anticipated."

He sighed, then took her hand and dismissed [Definitely Not Me].

Before summoning Weaver's Mask, he looked at Cassie somberly and said:

"Let's go see what all the noise is about, then."

Soon, he was standing on the emerald grass of the Ivory Island.

Sunny could see that the camp was much more lively than it should have been.

The Sword Army had already ventured to carve a path south, with countless Awakened soldiers, Masters, and Saints leaving the safety of the fortified stronghold.

The progress was slow, but methodical and steady.

If the cloud veil did not break and the jungle was not incinerated, Saint Tyris would part the clouds herself. Blinding sunlight would flood the bone plain and turn the crimson growth — as well as those abominations that were not fast enough to escape into the Hollows — to ash.

Then, after the Cloudveil repaired itself, the army would advance.

They would clash with the regrowing jungle and the Nightmare Creatures being born in its scarlet depths, pushing toward the fissures in the bone that served as the source of the dreadful infestation. The battles were punishing, dire, and often prolonged — but with champions like Nephis and Summer Knight spearheading the offensive, the Sword Army was slowly gaining ground.

Once they reached a fissure and cut the roots of the jungle in the area, its remnants would be burned, and a fortress would be constructed around the fissure. A containment detachment would be left to garrison the fortress, tasked with preventing the jungle from extending its tendrils to the surface again.

By now, there was a disorderly chain of a dozen of these fortresses and numerous smaller forts extending west, almost all the way to the point where the collarbone and the breastbone connected.

Considering the current state of the main camp, though, most of the Saints leading the expedition force had been recalled ahead of the scheduled rotation.

Sunny did not know what exactly happened in NQSC… but he was quite confident that the fortune of the Sword Army was about to turn for the worst.

'Those Song sisters have been acting too calm, indeed.'

Shaking his head, he followed Cassie toward the Valor Keep — which was the name given to the central stronghold of the camp by the soldiers.

The two of them entered under its heavy roof and were immediately guided to a spacious chamber where many Saints had already gathered, all wearing somber expressions on their faces.

"Lady Cassia, have you received any news? What exactly happened"

Cassie smiled briefly at the dashing Rivalen of Aegis Rose and shook her head apologetically.

"I am on my way to see the King. There will be more clarity soon."

A Knight of Valor arrived, then hurriedly led Cassie and Sunny deeper into the stronghold.

Soon, they entered a smaller chamber. There were only a few people inside — all of them among the strongest and most important champions of the Sword Army.

The King of Swords himself was sitting on an unadorned chair that had been carved out of stone, wearing a cold expression. Morgan was standing behind him, her usual air of polite amusement gone. Nephis was leaning against a wall, her white armor smeared with ash.

Sunny spared her a brief glance, then looked away.

There were three other Saints of the Sword Army in the chamber — Sky Tide, Summer Knight, and Sir Jest of Dagonet.

There was one more person, as well.

A handsome man was kneeling in front of the stone throne, his sunken face marked by pain and fatigue. His presence possessed a mystifying depth to it, as if most of him was hidden from sight.

His dark armor, crafted from the skin of some dreadful leviathan, was severely damaged and bloodied.

The man had his head lowered, so Sunny could not see his eyes. However, his black hair, strangely enough, had slight accents of dark blue.

Sunny's expression changed as he recognized his former friend and comrade, Saint Naeve of the House of Night.

Cassie, meanwhile, bowed deeply.

"I brought him, Your Majesty."

Anvil spared her a glance and nodded.

"Just in time."

With that, he shifted his gaze to the Nightwalker, remained silent for a few moments, and then asked in a cold, heavy tone:

"So, Saint Naeve. I've brought you and your people here, just as you requested. Now, I think, it's time that you give me an explanation. There are reports that the armada of the House of Night is on the move. Night Garden itself has set sail. So, tell me...

what, exactly, are your elders scheming?"

Naeve shivered slightly and lingered for a while, as if gathering courage.

Eventually, he took a deep breath, straightened, and looked the King of Swords straight in the eyes.

When he spoke, his voice sounded firm:

"You are mistaken, Supreme Anvil. My elders are not scheming anything. In fact… they are dead."

Naeve paused for a moment, and then added hoarsely:

"They have all been… turned. The House of Night is no more."

Chapter-1861: Homecoming

Thick fog shrouded the shores of a nebulous sea. Below it, waves continued their eternal assault on the indifferent barrier of land, dreaming of washing it away. They rustled quietly, just like they had rustled for eons. Not far away, the water was louder — there, a wide river fell into the sea, a deep inlet created by its estuary.

Currently, there was a group of riders moving along the shore. Their steeds were Echoes of slain abominations; their enchanted armor was damp with morning dew. Their vermilion cloaks bore the insignia of Clan Valor.

They were Knights and Squires who had been left behind to protect the fringes of the Sword Domain, currently on patrol.

As they approached the estuary, the leader of the patrol — a seasoned Knight in heavy armor — raised a fist to command the rest to stop. He took a canteen off his belt, drank some water, and then listened to the murmur of waves.

Dreadful abominations would come from the depths of the Stormsea sometimes and swim upriver, threatening the lands beyond. The weaker ones would be slain in the shallows by patrolmen like them, but if a truly powerful Nightmare Creature emerged from the depths, they would have to retreat and prepare to fight it at Rivergate, the fortress of Clan Dagonet.

The shores of Stormsea were a strange place. Nights here were much longer than they were deeper inland, and the stars were much brighter. The sun never quite rose above the horizon, drowning the world in ethereal twilight during the day. Time flowed slowly, and life seemed fleeting. In the mornings, white fog veiled the world.

The Knight frowned and gazed into the fog.

Today, the sea sounded strange.

"Summon your weapons."

The patrolmen did as he said. Their Echoes turned to face the shore, each baring their fangs.

It seemed that a battle was upon them. Some felt tense because most of the Sword Domain warriors had followed the king to war, hoping to punish the wicked queen of Song. Others remained calm — no matter how many warriors had left, the garrison of Rivergate was still strong, and the fortress itself was still impregnable.

No matter what horror crawled from the sea, they would deal with it.

…A few moments later, however, their confidence was shattered.

The eyes of the warriors widened, and their faces paled. Even the Echoes seemed daunted, a few of them shrinking back in response to the fear of their masters.

A vast shadow appeared in the fog, towering above the shore like a dark mountain. Then, it drew closer, dwarfing the world.

The patrolmen had to crane their necks just to guess the scale of the vague shadow.

Their captain was petrified.

"W—wha…"

Before he could finish the sentence, the dark mountain was almost upon them, its shape finally revealed from the fog.

It was the bow of a titanic ship.

"Back!"

They did not have time to react before the world shuddered.

The estuary was deep, but not deep enough. The gargantuan vessel rammed the underwater slope of the shore at full speed, splitting it

apart. A vast gorge opened in the ground, reaching far inland, and the triumphant waves finally had their dreams fulfilled — the roaring water rushed into the abyssal chasm, causing the river to change course.

For a few moments, the bow of the ship flew even higher, and then slowly plummeted down. When it fell, there was another quake. Countless tons of foaming water were displaced and thrown into the sky, and the titanic vessel slid forward hundreds of meters before finally coming to rest, beached and leaning slightly to the side.

The tranquil shore had turned into a scene of utter devastation. The scale of it was so immense that the human mind struggled to come to terms with it. The colossal ship lay on the sand like a dark mountain, rivers of water cascading down from its ancient hull. The barnacles encrusting the lower parts of it were like a map of bygone eras, glistening bleakly in the dim radiance of twilight.

The patrolmen had been thrown to the ground by the successive quakes. Still stunned and horrified, they slowly climbed to their feet. Some raised their weapons hesitantly, others tried to mount their monstrous steeds.

But all of them were staring at the monumental silhouette of the beached vessel.

That was why they all noticed when a human figure appeared on the bow, so high above them that it looked no larger than an ant.

The figure stood motionlessly for a few moments, gazing down. Then, it took a step forward and fell, landing on the tilted slope of the ship's hull. The figure slid down the ancient wood, gaining terrible speed, then pushed itself off its surface and plummeted down.

He landed into the shallow water with a splash, then straightened gracefully and took a step forward.

It was a man clad in dark leather armor. He was tall and slender, with pale skin and raven-black hair. His face was sharp and thin — not exactly handsome, but at the same time strangely beautiful. His eyes were like two pools of liquid silver that reflected the world back

on itself.

His gaze was cold and chilling, as if a deep dark ocean was barely contained beneath the thin film of mirror-like silver.

Despite the fact that the man was alone, the crowd of patrolmen reeled back, each overcome by sudden dread.

He walked across the shallow water, surrounded by swirling mist, and stepped onto the shore. There, the man knelt, reached down, and carefully — almost tenderly — picked up a handful of sand. Ignoring the warriors of the Sword Domain, he looked at it for a while, then slowly made a fist and let the sand slip through his fingers.

His lips twisted slightly, forming a dark, bitter, terrifying smile.

Standing up, the man turned his gaze to the patrolmen and walked toward them with unhurried steps.

They gripped their weapons tighter.

The Knight who had led the patrol glanced at the titanic ship, then asked hoarsely:

"The Night Garden… who are you? Why are you here?"

The man answered in a calm tone:

"Me? I am Prince Mordret of Valor, the rightful heir of these lands."

The eyes of the Knight widened slightly, while Mordret added with a cold smile:

"And I am here to take what is mine."

The patrolmen shuddered.

Their leader gritted his teeth.

"It's you! You vile creature… the only thing that we will give you is death!"

Continuing to walk in their direction, Mordret laughed.

"I see someone has a very high opinion of himself."

His laughter stopped abruptly, and he pierced the Knight with an eerie, frightening gaze.

"But are you sure that you are worthy?"

A moment later, more figures appeared on the bow of the Night Garden.

Mordret smiled.

"Because I have thirteen Transcendent bodies on that boat. I am also the sole ruler of the Stormsea, the master of the Night Garden, and the owner of all the Citadels of the South. Well… I guess, technically, the Citadels belong to Queen Song. But why care about the technicalities?"

The Knight paled.

His hands trembled as he raised his sword, and a single word escaped from his lips:

"T—traitor!"

The smile disappeared from Mordret's face, replaced by infinite coldness.

In the next moment, something whistled in the air, and the Knight fell to his knees. His head rolled off his neck and fell into the sand, which was painted red by the torrent of steaming blood.

Mordret shifted his gaze to the remaining warriors.

He remained silent for a few moments, and then smiled pleasantly.

"One should not forget his manners, don't you think? Ah, but today is a special occasion. On such a special day, I am inclined to be forgiving. So... the rest of you may go. Go on, run away.

Oh, and tell your masters…"

As the warriors of Valor slowly backed away, then turned to run, he watched them escape silently, and added with a dark gleam in his mirror-like eyes:

"Tell them that I am coming."

Mordret closed his eyes and inhaled deeply.

"...I am coming home."

Chapter-1862: Puppet Master

The nature of the war had changed overnight.

The Sword Domain had dominated the conflict from its very first day. Their army was stronger, their progress was faster. They suffered fewer casualties and gained more benefits. As time went on, their advantage seemed poised to inevitably snowball into an overwhelming superiority. Even though the two armies had not clashed directly yet, the warriors of Valor were already winning.

All it took was a single person to completely reverse the situation.

That person was Mordret, the firstborn of the King of Swords — who served the Queen of Worms now, ironically enough.

When Sunny first heard Naeve's proclamation, his eyes widened behind Weaver's Mask.

'The House of Night…'

After the Chain of Nightmares, the position of the third Great Clan was severely weakened. Without a Sovereign to rule it and a Dream Gate to bring countless settlers to their territory, the House of Night lost the ability to compete against Valor and Song. Its standing and resources were still immense, but nowhere near the power of the two burgeoning Domains.

Nevertheless, the House of Night had not given up without a fight. Instead, it seemed as though the threat of losing relevance had galvanized the leaders of the lesser of the three Great Clans. In recent years, they had been quite active. More than that, their actions were more decisive, daring, and successful than ever before.

In just the last two years, the House of Night had laid siege to and conquered seven new Citadels in the nebulous reaches of the

Stormsea. Such a feat had been unheard of before, and did a lot to bolster their faltering renown.

Of course, now that Naeve had spoken, the true reason for these triumphs was revealed to be quite different from what people believed, and chillingly sinister.

It was not that the House of Night had become more daring or potent. It was just that Mordret had stolen the body of one of its leaders. And then, like a plague, he slowly spread through the ranks of the Nightwalkers, unseen and unnoticed.

Not only had the rest of the world been none the wiser — even the members of the House of Night itself had not suspected anything while their rulers were being replaced, one by one. Not even the families of those taken by the Prince of Nothing were able to discover that their parents, children, and siblings had been switched.

There had been moments of friction and conflict, of course. There had been tension and a feeling of unease, a subtle sense of alienation from those who had been closest before… an eerie feeling that something was not quite right.

But with how fast the world was changing, and how dire the situation of the Great Clan was, people simply assumed that these rare instances of incongruity were caused by the shifting demands of the turbulent times.

Mordret's deceit was too stellar.

Only a few had started to suspect that something terrible was happening inside the House of Night. That the people who looked, talked, and acted as their friends and family could have been… someone else. That there was something alien hiding behind the familiar faces.

Naeve had been one of the first to start harboring that harrowing suspicion. He did not describe what he had felt in those days, but Sunny could only imagine how eerie, chilling, and nightmarish such an experience would be. No, actually… he could not. His mind failed to imagine the appalling scenes of what his former friend must have

gone through.

At first, Naeve suspected that the House of Night had been infiltrated by the Skinwalker. He made secret inquiries to make sure that there were no Nightmare Creatures among the leaders of his clan, and proved that theory wrong. His next steps were much more troublesome — he couldn't continue the investigation alone, and did not know whom to trust.

Anyone around him could have been the enemy.

He did discover a few trustworthy allies in the end, though. They tried to ascertain the scale and depths of the encroaching corruption… but it was already too late.

They had run out of time.

All that they had managed to do was prepare a path of escape for themselves and their families. That was how they ended up in front of the Valor compound in NQSC, asking for asylum.

Sunny sucked in a stifled breath.

'Curse him…'

It seemed that Mordret had fully inherited Soul Stealer's Transcendent Ability. He was able to split his soul — and that, in turn, allowed him to possess multiple vessels at the same time.

The vessels he had collected in the last four years, without ever being discovered, were the Saints and other key figures of the House of Night.

There seemed to be some limit to his Ability, at least — otherwise, he would have taken everyone, not just the most valued champions of the Great Clan. Awakened warriors and many Masters had been spared, as were the mundane members of their families. A few leaders of the clan had avoided becoming his vessels, as well, for one reason or another.

Finally, he had revealed himself and took control of the Stormsea once the Sword Army became entrenched in Godgrave, leading a

pincer attack on his father's Domain from the south. That was what had caused the recent bloodshed — Mordret was cleaning house, eliminating those whom he had failed to possess.

Sunny was both appalled and impressed. He had suspected that Mordret was facilitating secret negotiations with the House of Night on behalf of Ki Song. What he had not expected was that Mordret would simply… become the House of Night.

Only three of the Night Saints, including Naeve, had escaped. A few more had been eliminated when Mordret openly attacked.

Despite that, at least thirteen of them had fallen into his hands. Which meant that the forces of Song had the power of more than sixty Saints on their side now, while Valor only had slightly more than forty.

Worse than that, now that the Sword Domain was being attacked, Anvil would have to split the forces of his army to prevent his son from conquering his kingdom. That would leave those who remained in Godgrave at a dire disadvantage.

But that was not all…

Mordret had not only taken the Saints of the House of Night, he had also taken all the Citadels that used to belong to the third Great Clan, adding them to the Domain of the Queen of Worms, thus breaking the balance vastly enhancing her power.

Among them was the Night Garden, meaning that Ki Song controlled two Great Citadels now.

More than that, Mordret was free to conquer the Citadels of the Sword Domain, denying their power to Anvil. Rivergate would probably fall in a matter of days… from there, the Prince of Nothing could easily reach Bastion, or assault other Citadels in the heartland of the Dream Realm.

The situation was dire.

However, before Naeve was even done speaking, Morgan cursed and dashed out of the chamber.

Before too long, the walls of the stronghold shook, and a cacophony of screams rose above the warcamp.

Chapter-1863: Repercussions

Naeve had not finished his tale yet when Anvil finally showed a reaction. Before, he sat motionlessly, looking at the kneeling Saint with a cold and heavy expression. His steely eyes remained calm — Sunny expected the king to display some kind of emotion at the mention of his son, but there was no change.

Now, however, he finally moved. All Anvil did was give Morgan a glance, but she suddenly cursed and dashed out of the room.

For a few moments, the stone chamber was enveloped by silence. Naeve looked at the king tensely, not sure what was going on.

Anvil studied him for a bit before saying evenly:

"That is enough. I understand what happened now."

Sunny was leaning on a wall with his arms crossed. He did not turn his head to look at Cassie, but spoke in his mind:

[There are no mirrors on the Ivory Island, are there?]

Her response came a few moments later.

[There are. However, the entire island is protected against that man with special enchantments. The royals themselves set them up… Valor has been preparing to deal with Mordret for a long time, so they have developed many measures.]

Sunny was somewhat relieved. However, he knew that those measures could not be universal — since the members of the royal clan had to be personally involved, inscribing the warding enchantments had to be an expensive and intricate endeavor.

[Make sure that those Fire Keepers that are in the camp remain on

the island, then. Those of them who had been with Nephis in the jungle should not try to come back for now, either.]

His original body was already making sure that Aiko did not leave the Marvelous Mimic.

Sunny knew Mordret too well, so he had a good idea about what would happen next.

And indeed, before too long, they heard a cacophony of screams.

The king did not give any of them permission to leave, and Sunny did not want to expose how vast the reach of his shadow sense was. So, none of them moved.

Only Naeve seemed to flinch.

"Your Majesty, what is…"

However, Anvil silenced him with a heavy gaze.

Finally, there was a hint of emotion in his eyes…

That emotion was cold, smoldering wrath.

"You don't need to be concerned, Saint Naeve. It is just a minor inconvenience."

Sunny was not sure if the inconvenience was really that minor. He commended Naeve for being able to sense Mordret's machinations when no one else had… however, the Nightwalker was too naive to think that his attempts to assemble allies to resist him would have escaped the Prince of Nothing.

There was only one explanation for why Naeve had been allowed to survive.

It was that one of his trusted allies — or a few — were Mordret's vessels. He had used Naeve and other asylum-seekers to carry him across the Dream Gate and bring him to the encampment of the Sword Army.

The extent of damage he would deal depended on how invested Mordret was in wreaking havoc in Godgrave.

Sunny shifted slightly.

'This shouldn't be his main goal.'

And, indeed, the screams grew silent soon.

A minute or two later, the doors opened, and Morgan walked in. Her hands were wet with blood… and she was carrying a severed head in one of them, her expression dark.

Naeve paled.

"W—why…"

Morgan spared him a short glance, then looked at her father.

"It was just one Ascended vessel. That man simply felt mischievous, it seems. The damage was… minimal. The watchers did not fail — it was just that the screening took too long. Those who remain in the waking world are already being checked, as well."

She lingered for a few moments, then added stiffly:

"He did have a lot to say, though."

With that, Morgan dropped the severed head on the floor near Naeve. The Nightwalker gritted his teeth, but did not recoil.

He studied the dead face silently, a hint of pain evident on his own. Then, he bowed his head.

"I apologize, Your Majesty."

'So they have some kind of way to tell which bodies are taken by Mordret. Unsurprising.'

Sunny felt a little apprehensive, because he did not.

Valor must have also possessed a method to if not destroy Mordret, then at least imprison him. The Prince of Nothing was nearly

immortal — at the very least, Sunny knew of no way to extinguish his existence except for defeating him in a soul duel, like what Nephis had done to Soul Stealer.

But that boon could very easily become a curse. Those who could not die ran the risk of ending up suffering eternal torment. While beings like Mordret — and Nephis to a lesser extent — could fear death less than most people, they also had a good reason to fear being caught by enemies much more.

Every strength could be exploited to become a weakness.

Sitting on the throne, Anvil sighed and leaned back. He seemed to be contemplating something.

Sunny, meanwhile, was considering the implications of Mordret's entering the board. Which were honestly quite shocking... he had expected some kind of diabolical stunt from the banished prince, but the bastard still managed to exceed his expectations.

The more Sunny thought, the more somber his expression grew.

The impact of the war in Godgrave was already bad enough. The Sword Army would be inevitably weakened, making things harder for him, Nephis, and Cassie. However, it was still a beneficial development overall — they needed Anvil and Ki Song to grind each other down in a prolonged conflict, after all. It wouldn't do for the King of Swords to gain an easy victory early on.

What concerned him much more were the repercussions that Mordret's actions would have for those who were not participating in the war.

The House of Night was… had been instrumental in guiding naval convoys across the ocean, for example. Without the Nightwalkers, the connections between the Quadrants would become much more tenuous. How was the government going to deliver Sleepers to the Awakened Academy next year? How would resources be shared between the continents?

More than that, what was the government going to do now that the

demise of the House of Night had demonstrated the kind of fate that awaited those who wished to remain neutral in the war between the two Domains?

There were more questions like that.

He sighed quietly and looked at Anvil.

Was the King of Swords contemplating the same problems Sunny was?

Somehow, he doubted it.

Eventually, Anvil shifted his gaze and looked at Morgan.

Everyone in the chamber held their breaths, feeling that his next words could very well change the flow of history.

The King of Swords considered his daughter for a few moments, and then said evenly:

"Return to Bastion. Stop him at all costs."

Morgan smiled faintly, then bowed.

"How many Saints can I take with me?"

Anvil simply raised an eyebrow.

"He is one man. You alone should be enough."

Morgan's lips trembled slightly. She straightened and looked at her father with the same faint smile.

"That man has the company of a dozen taken Saints. Am I supposed to stop him — all of him — alone? That hardly seems fair."

The King of Swords looked away from her and shrugged.

"If you think that it's unfair, go and find Saints of your own."

Sunny was listening to their dialogue with a feeling of incongruity. Why was Anvil so nonchalant? Why wasn't he sending more forces

back to Bastion with Morgan? Was the progress in Godgrave really that important, or did he simply not care about losing control of more Citadels to Mordret?

If so, why?

Either the King of Swords had lost his mind, or there was something Sunny was failing to understand.

Morgan remained silent for a while, then bowed again.

"As you command."

She straightened, and then suddenly pointed at Naeve.

"Oh, look. I found a Saint. Can I take him?"

Anvil waved his head dismissively.

"Do with the remnant Nightwalkers as you wish."

He turned his heavy gaze back to her, studied her face closely, and then added in a cold tone:

"...Don't lose to that creature again, Morgan."

Chapter-1864: Sibling Rivalry

After Morgan was dismissed, taking Naeve with her, the king had a few words to say to the rest of them.

The theater of war had changed dramatically, so there were a lot of adjustments that had to be made. The King of Swords himself would remain in Godgrave, and so would all the Saints of the Sword Army — with the exception of his daughter.

It did not seem like having one less Transcendent would change a lot of things, but Morgan's loss could not be measured in terms of raw power. She was the principal strategist of the army and the field commander of its expedition force — the vacuum her departure left had to be filled by someone.

Anvil took over the strategy matters himself, and gave Nephis free rein of the expedition force. Her task was simple, but imperative — to invade the Breastbone Reach and conquer the Citadel hidden in the Hollow below it.

Sunny's raiding party was dissolved before even leaving the Nameless Temple. Instead, he was to join the main body of the army and help Nephis take the Citadel.

After receiving these orders, they were dismissed. Only Jest of Dagonet stayed behind to counsel his old comrade's son on something none of them were privy to. Anvil would summon the rest of the Saints and inform them of the situation after that.

Cassie told Rivalen of Aegis Rose to wait for the king's summons on the way out.

Leaving the Valor Keep, all three of them — Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie — felt rattled. The shift caused by Mordret's devastation of the House of Night was too tectonic to be fathomed swiftly.

Sunny glanced at his two companions, and then said quietly:

"I won't see you soon."

With that, he turned around and walked away. There was a residence assigned to him in the camp, so that was where he went.

Not long after that, he met Nephis and Cassie on the edge of the Ivory Island as Master Sunless.

Nephis smiled at him faintly and gestured to the great pagoda.

"Let's talk inside."

The Sword Army would be shaken once the news spread… and so would the entire world. Nephis had to leave the camp and take command of the expedition force in a few hours. Sunny would follow her, but Cassie had to stay back. So, they did not have a lot of time to talk face-to-face.

As they ascended the stairs, Sunny couldn't help but think about Naeve and the remnants of the House of Night.

Mordret's culling had been chillingly thorough when it came to the leadership and champions of the now-fallen Great Clan. Only three of its Saints remained — the rest were either taken as vessels by the Prince of Nothing or had been killed.

The situation among the Masters — the core of the clan's power — was a little different. Naeve did not have the exact numbers, but more than two-thirds of them were either taken or lost their lives. Those who remained were here in Godgrave now, with a few stragglers still lost somewhere in the waking world.

The mundane dependents — family members and loyal servants of the clan — were also in the waking world, temporarily sheltered in the complex built around the Dream Gate. Mordret had not targeted them consciously, and although some had become collateral damage in his bloody coup, most were still alive. Just… displaced, traumatized, and scared.

The envoys of the royal clan would have to make sure that none of

them are a hidden vessel of the banished prince. However, that would have to wait, because Valor had to deal with a more pressing issue first.

It was the fate of the Awakened warriors of the House of Night, who were in the most precarious situation.

By now, every Citadel in the Stormsea was under Mordret's control. Saints and Masters were relatively safe, because there was no timer for when they would have to return to their anchors. The Awakened, however, would be transported back to the Dream Realm the moment they fell asleep or lost consciousness.

When that happened, they would either become Mordret's hostages or his victims.

There were two ways to avoid that end. The first way was to be brought to a new Citadel by a Saint and anchor themselves at its Gateway. The second way was to pass through a Dream Gate and enter the Dream Realm physically.

The problem was that each of them had to be tested before being allowed in Valor territory, so that another hidden vessel of the Prince of Nothing did not infiltrate Godgrave. The process was not fast, so it was not clear if all of them would be able to stave off sleep before that happened.

Remembering his own attempts to stay awake after returning from the Forgotten Shore, Sunny did not envy them.

In any case, their fates were in the hands of Morgan now. Anvil had given her carte blanche to deal with the remnants of the House of Night as she saw fit — and while the Awakened warriors would have to come to Godgrave, she would without a doubt try to bring at least the strongest of the remnants to the newly created southern front.

They had no choice but to obey her. More than that… Sunny was not sure that they had a reason to refuse. Each of the remaining members of the House of Night was, without a doubt, full of desire to avenge their fallen kin. Morgan would offer them a chance to fight against Mordret, and probably sweeten the deal by promising to take care of

the mundane members of their families.

Why would they say no? They did not have to be coerced.

The strongest chains were often those people put on themselves.

…Sunny would know.

Finally, they reached Neph's living quarters at the highest level of the tower. Cassie summoned several Memories to prevent anyone from listening in on their conversation.

That precaution was actually meant to be broken. This close to a living Sovereign and his strongest servants, they had to be extremely cautious about sharing vital information. Therefore, they always assumed that the first layer of protection would be dismantled.

Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie played their roles and spoke about the task facing the expedition force.

At the same time, they were having another, entirely silent conversation. It was a bit awkward because Cassie had to relay what Sunny and Nephis said, but they had grown used to communicating that way in the recent weeks.

[Why is he only sending Morgan?]

Sunny was still confused by Anvil's decision.

Nephis shook her head subtly.

[Actually, that makes sense. Every Saint she brings will just become a potential vessel for Mordret… Valor has methods to protect a soul from his Aspect, but no method is absolute. That Master you told me about, Welthe, is proof.]

He considered the situation soberly, then took a deep breath.

[Why did he not take all of House of Night? Why was there only one hidden vessel among those whom Naeve brought to Godgrave? Soul Stealer had been able to take millions of bodies for himself. But something is stopping Mordret from doing the same.]

Granted, Soul Stealer had been in a rather bad shape when they saw him.

Sunny contemplated for a while. Eventually, his eyes narrowed.

[There is also the issue of Saints. Mordret is in a unique position — much like myself — in that he can control many Citadels at once. In my case, the number is limited by the number of shadows I possess. In his case, it should be limited by the number of Transcendent bodies he controls. Therefore…]

Cassie shifted to face him and finished his thought:

[...Unless he takes more Saints, he can only control fourteen Citadels. He can't go on a rampage across the Sword Domain, demolishing Anvil's base of power, without releasing his hold on the Stormsea. And there are no Saints left in the Sword Domain.]

Nephis nodded slowly.

[That is why he only sent Morgan. He does not want to give Mordret fuel to burn his kingdom down… no, rather, it is inconsequential to him how much the kingdom suffers. As long as the Domain itself is not severely diminished, Anvil will continue prioritizing Godgrave. At most, what he wants is to protect Bastion.]

And so, Morgan and Mordret were destined to clash again — this time on the shores of the Mirror Lake, not in the frigid reaches of Antarctica.

Sunny did not have a lot of hope for Morgan. But then again… laying siege to a daemon's stronghold was a daunting task, especially if someone like her was defending it.

His thoughts turned to all the people he had left behind in Bastion.

How were they going to fare in the middle of a clash between the two Transcendent siblings?

For now, at least, that was out of his control.

Sunny sighed, then looked at his companions.

[So… what does all of this mean for us?]

Chapter-1865: Into the Fray

They did not have a lot of time to talk, so the discussion was brief. Afterwards, Cassie left to have a separate conversation with Jet. Sunny and Nephis were left alone.

Nephis had just returned from the battlefield, and she would have to leave the camp in an hour or two — this time, not just to lend her power to the expedition force, but also to become its commander.

Her armor was smeared by soot, and her hair was blackened by ash. Grime and dried blood stained her alabaster skin… this was a good sign, actually. It meant that she had not been forced to assume her Transcendent form as of late, at least — otherwise, her body would have been pure and pristine, all the dirt burned away by the incandescent flames.

Still, now that they had a moment to breathe, Nephis looked at herself, then threw a quick glance at Sunny and left to have a bath.

Soon, she returned, her silver hair glistening with moisture. She had dismissed the outer layer of her armor, and was now wearing only the thin cloth underlayer, which clung slightly to her damp body.

Sunny studied Nephis carefully.

He could tell that she had called upon the power of her Aspect recently — and extensively, as well. Her condition was not too bad, but there were telltale signs. There was a distant look in her eyes and a hint of coldness written in the graceful lines of her beautiful face. There was an afterglow of immolating flame and a memory of scorching heat in her brilliant presence.

Nephis had been suffering the torment of her cruel Flaw too much, and too often.

Sunny sighed. Noticing that she was rubbing her shoulders with a grimace, he raised his hands and smiled.

"How about a massage?"

A subtle smile illuminated her face, as well. She nodded silently.

He moved to her wide bed, while Nephis sat in front of him, leaning on his chest. Sunny placed his fingers on her shoulders and got to work, kneading her tense muscles with masterful ease. From his point of view, he could see the top of her head, the tip of her nose, and the beads of water glistening on her delicate clavicle.

Her garment was thin, so he could feel the heat of her body. Her skin was silky and smooth. He put more strength into his fingers, causing her to let out a small whimper, and then a satisfied sigh.

He felt her body relax a little.

Nephis remained silent for a while, enjoying the massage, and then asked:

"How come you are so good at this?"

Sunny froze for a moment before continuing to rub her shoulders. He would have really, really preferred to keep the source of his massage skills a secret, but sadly, his own Flaw compelled him to answer.

He hesitated for a moment.

"Well… one of my Attributes makes me particularly good at all kinds of handiwork."

He paused, then added reluctantly:

"Oh, and I have practised on myself a lot while wandering the Dream Realm."

'Ah. How embarrassing.'

Nephis let out another contented sigh and closed her eyes in pleasure.

"...Perks of having many bodies. Unfair."

Sunny chuckled.

"You're the one who is benefitting from that unfairness in the end, though. So should you really be complaining?"

Nephis smiled faintly.

"I'm not complaining."

Sunny worked on her shoulders for a while, then switched to her back. When he finished, Nephis looked much more relaxed. Her overall condition had improved significantly, as well, and the hint of detached coldness disappeared from her gaze.

He embraced her from behind and asked gently:

"Hungry?"

She nodded.

His shadow disappeared for a few moments, and then returned holding a tray of food. It was taken directly from the Marvelous Mimic's kitchen and smelled delicious — thanks to the Dream Gate, the army did not really suffer from the lack of supplies, and he received his fair share from the Fire Keepers.

...He also had his own stash and received a less fair share through the backdoor connections established by Aiko, but that was neither here nor there.

Sunny let Nephis go and watched her eat with a pleased expression. Eventually, though, he sighed.

"I really hoped that we would get to spend more time together"

Both of them were in Godgrave, but he remained on the Ivory Island most of the time. Nephis, meanwhile, was always on the forefront of the moving battlefield, helping the expedition force carve a path through the monstrous jungle. There was a rotation system in place to let the legions and their commanders rest and recuperate, but hers

was a special case.

Nephis was too important to the offensive effort, so she only returned to camp once a week, at best. Now that Morgan was gone, and she was assuming command of the whole expedition force, those rare days would become even fewer and far between.

She gave him a confused look.

"But we do get to spend more time together."

What she meant was that, this time, the Lord of Shadows would be accompanying her to the battlefront. So, the two of them did not have to separate… technically.

Sunny grimaced.

"That's not the same."

The Lord of Shadows was still him, but that incarnation of his was stuck wearing a suit of armor and a mask all the time. The temporary encampment of the expedition force was also not a place where one could get privacy, let alone share tender moments such as this one.

Sunny had not exactly expected that they would get many opportunities to go on dates in Godgrave… but that did nothing to quench his greed. He had barely got the taste of being with Nephis, and he wanted more.

He wanted to experience all the profound things that lovers experienced, and all the stupid things too. Sadly, war — especially one as dire and dreadful as this one — was a terrible background for romantic encounters.

'Damnation. What does a man have to do to take his girlfriend out on a date?'

The answer, apparently, was to conquer a Death Zone and kill a couple of Sovereigns.

'...Noted.'

Nephis finished her food and looked at him silently for a while. Eventually, she said with a hint of a smile in her voice:

"I am still happy that the Lord of Shadows is coming with me, this time."

Sunny couldn't help but raise his chin a little.

He coughed.

"Are you? Oh, that guy… he's not bad, I guess."

Nephis gave him a nonchalant look and lingered for a few moments.

Then, she sighed.

"I wouldn't mind if he was a little bit bad, though."

Sunny gave her an intense stare.

"That can be arranged, as well…"

***

A couple hours later, Nephis and the Lord of Shadows left the warcamp, accompanied by the returning Saints.

In those hours, the Sword Army had been shaken by the appalling news. The treacherous Queen of Worms had eradicated the House of Night and took control of the Stormsea. Now, her forces were mounting an invasion from the south, threatening to annex the defenseless rear territories of the Sword Domain.

Many of the soldiers had families and friends there. They were rattled, dismayed, and frightened.

Many were scared of what the disastrous attack would mean for them here in Godgrave. The morale of the army suffered a tremendous blow.

In these circumstances, Nephis had to project an image of absolute confidence. Which she did, instilling the frightened soldiers with a

sense of renewed determination and hope.

Her brilliant figure was like a symbol of bravery and steadfast will. Anyone who saw her couldn't help but feel something stir in their souls, and straighten their backs unconsciously.

And so, her flames spread.

A dark figure that walked by her side attracted much less attention. And yet, those who saw it felt calmer, as well — albeit for an entirely different reason.

Changing Star of the Immortal Flame was valiant and noble.

But the Lord of Shadows, that man… he was sinister and ruthless.

And now, he was entering the fray.

Chapter-1866: Cutting the Red Tape

NQSC was in chaos.

The damage dealt to the city by the bloodshed in the strongholds of the House of Night was minimal, even though some of the battles had briefly spilled onto the streets.

However, the blow dealt to the morale of the citizens was severe.

The news of what had truly happened was slow to spread, and this time, even the government propaganda machine was not sure how to handle the unprecedented and ominous event. Because of that, wild rumors were spreading, making already anxious people feel even less secure.

Granted, the actual truth was, in many senses, much worse than the rumors.

The streets of the city were strangely desolate. Those people who did venture outside walked with hurried steps. The public transport was enveloped by tense silence… the fires had been put out, but pillars of smoke were still rising into the sky.

In that subdued atmosphere, a procession of armored PTVs stopped in front of the government headquarters, and a young woman with strange and vivid vermilion eyes stepped out of one of them.

Usually, Morgan would have changed into an appropriate attire for an official visit, but wasting time on appearances was a luxury she did not have today. So, she was still wearing her battle armor, her red cloak moving slightly in the wind.

Her hands were encased in intricate gauntlets forged of black steel.

The craftsmanship was stellar, but they were still burdensome when trying to perform finer tasks. Sadly, there was little she could do about that.

Morgan missed her molded leather gloves.

A small army of guards poured out of the armored PTVs — most of them were mundane retainers of the clan, so their presence was purely symbolic. It did look like the government compound was about to be besieged, which was the intended purpose.

Maintaining a calm and slightly haughty expression, Morgan ascended the stairs and entered the stronghold. She heard gasps and saw the government workers in the lobby react to her entrance. Some paled; others were enthralled by her Transcendent beauty. She did not spare any of them any attention and walked forward with confident steps.

A man with a bit more poise gave her a deep bow.

"Lady Morgan. Why…"

She looked at him coldly and saw the man take an involuntary step back.

"Take me to the council chamber."

He hesitated.

"But…"

Her gaze grew a little more intense, and all the blood drained from the man's face.

"T—this way, my lady…"

Her entourage remained in the lobby as she was escorted deep underground.

There were countless security checkpoints and fortified chokeholds on the way. No one dared to bar her path or slow her down, though — even if they wished, they couldn't. There would have been a

complicated dance of diplomatic procedures on any other day, but today, Morgan was not in the mood.

The decision-makers of the government had mostly likely given their permission, as well.

Soon, she entered a spacious conference room. The room looked painfully ordinary, considering its purpose, but that was entirely the point. The government was aggressively utilitarian in everything it did, as if to constantly remind its members of their purpose and function.

There were a couple dozen people inside the room, gathered around a projection table — both mundane and Awakened. The government did not discriminate between the two, and its leaders were a mix of those who carried the Nightmare Spell and those who did not. In fact, the current Chancellor was a mundane man, as was the previous one.

Morgan did not pay him any attention, though. Instead, she focused on five individuals.

Wake of Ruin, Dream Merchant, Soul Reaper, Nightingale, and Raised by Wolves. The five government Saints.

The people in the conference room had been in the middle of a heated discussion just a few moments ago, but when she entered, they all fell silent, looking at her with expressions that varied from wariness to dismay.

Morgan gave them a pleasant smile, then took a chair, dragged it away from the table, sat down, and leisurely crossed her legs.

She was on their territory and outnumbered, with intense gazes boring into her like drills. And yet, it seemed as if the leaders of the government were the nervous ones — Morgan remained perfectly at ease.

"Ladies and gentlemen. It is good to see you all."

There were a few moments of tense silence, and then the Chancellor gave Wake of Ruin a brief glance. The old man — just as unpleasant as ever — looked at her and gritted his teeth.

"...What do you want, Saint Morgan?"

She met his heavy gaze with a chilling one of her own.

"Straight to business, then? It is a pleasure to see you as well, Saint Cor."

He scoffed.

"Have you come to exchange pleasantries? As you can see, we were in the middle of something."

His expression darkened, betraying a hint of barely suppressed fury.

"Thanks to you and your oh-so-great clan."

He would have been more polite, usually. But today, even someone as seasoned as Wake of Ruin seemed to be struggling with maintaining a cool head.

Morgan raised her eyebrows, as if sincerely confused.

"My clan? Surely, you are not blaming the criminal acts of those Song extremists on my family."

She shook her head in dejection.

"First, they stage an unprovoked attack on my sister… during a Gate crisis, no less. Then, they massacre the noble members of the illustrious House of Night and throw the world into chaos. It seems to me that my father and the esteemed members of my great family are the only ones who are earnestly trying to stop the villainy of these Song terrorists. And yet, I am not welcomed warmly here.

Instead, I am given a cold shoulder…"

The old man gave her a dark look.

"Spare me the sarcasm, girl. I've been fighting against the Nightmare Spell from long before you were born. I watched the House of Night be established, and now, I've seen it fall. Surely, you understand what that means for the fate of humanity… ah, why do I even bother!

Maybe you don't. All of you seem to have lost your minds."

He shook his head and sighed heavily, suddenly looking even older.

"...Just tell us what you want."

Morgan fluttered her eyelashes a few times, looking around the chamber with an innocent expression.

Her gaze lingered on Soul Reaper, Raised by Wolves, and Nightingale for a fraction of a second longer than it did on the rest.

Then, she smiled slightly.

"Well... you see… my father told me to go and find a few Saints…"

Chapter-1867: Quid Pro Quo

There were a few moments of silence after Morgan's remark. Wake of Ruin studied her intently, then scoffed.

"You can't be serious…"

The slight smile lingered on Morgan's face for a bit, then disappeared without a trace. The hint of levity was also gone from her eyes, leaving behind only cold intensity. Suddenly, the entire chamber felt drowned in a sense of eerie sharpness, as if every edge and surface here suddenly came to possess a keen edge.

A few of the mundane members of the government elite paled.

Morgan sighed deeply.

"Why can't I be serious? If anything, it seems to me that you are the one who is failing to comprehend the reality of your situation, venerable Saint Cor."

She slowly looked at the faces of the high administrators of the government and said, her voice devoid of any amusement:

"The House of Night has been consumed by Song. Their Citadels are conquered, their rulers are dead, and the corpses of their Saints are being worn like suits by a deranged monster. That is what fate has in store for those who foolishly hope to cling to a pretence of neutrality in the war between my house and the Queen of Worms."

She smiled darkly and added in a voice as calm as it was sharp:

"You must have already asked yourself this question… what happens to us now that Ki Song has shown her willingness to stop at nothing to win this war? The House of Night had refused to take a side, and in the end, the choice was made for them. Do you really think that

the same won't happen to you? What makes you confident that you won't be next to be destroyed by her?"

Wake of Ruin lingered with the answer, as if unsure what to say. His expression was dark.

Morgan shook her head with contempt.

"Those who can't keep up with the current of time will be drowned by it. You are already a step behind, and you already don't have a choice. Your neutrality is a thing of the past — now, it is hypocrisy at best, and incompetence at worst. The Great Clans might have started the war, but that doesn't mean that others can escape it.

The fate of humanity will be decided by who claims victory in Godgrave, and that means your fates, too. At the end of the day, the only thing you can decide is which side to submit to."

The old man glared at her. The corner of his mouth twitched, and he spat angrily:

"And whose fault is…"

However, a calm voice interrupted him.

Soul Reaper Jet, who had remained silent all that time, finally spoke.

"There's no point in assigning blame, Saint Cor."

Morgan looked at the chillingly beautiful woman.

Jet was cold and composed, with icy blue eyes and short raven-black hair. Her reputation was more than a little bit sinister, but it was also formidable. Above all else, she was known for her ruthless competence.

Morgan did not know Soul Reaper well, but they had fought side by side in the Battle of the Black Skull and later in the Nightmare Desert. She had a good impression of the government Saint.

Jet was... sensible.

As if to echo her thoughts, the icy woman shifted her gaze to Morgan and said lazily:

"Your choice of words is a bit jarring, Lady Morgan. You say that we must submit to someone… I prefer to see it as having to support someone, though. After all, it is the Sovereigns who find themselves in need of our strength, not the other way around."

Soul Reaper smiled coldly and asked:

"So, why should we choose to support Valor instead of Song? After all… the odds seem to be against the Sword Domain, at the moment."

Morgan reciprocated the smile.

'Sensible, indeed.'

It was almost as if Jet had expected this to happen. Maybe she had — it wasn't hard to guess what Valor's next step would be.

"Because Ki Song is an abominable existence — a hungry beast that should never have been allowed to be born. You know what her Aspect is, and what her kingdom might become. She doesn't care whether she rules the living or the dead… so, do you really trust her to keep humanity alive?"

Soul Reaper Jet stared at her silently for a while, then leaned back and chuckled.

"What an ironic thing to say to me, of all people. Thank you, Lady Morgan. I appreciate your sense of humor. Now, can we hear the real reason?"

Morgan smiled.

"It feels nice to be appreciated. Sure. First of all… three of you were in a Nightmare with the person who is marching on Bastion right now. You know what he is capable of, and that he is not burdened by matters of morality, compassion, or human decency. There are millions of people living in Bastion — I can defend the castle, but I can't protect the city beyond alone.

Saint Athena, you've spent the last four years living there. Are you really comfortable sitting back and doing nothing while that person has been set free in the Sword Domain? Are the rest of you?"

Raised by Wolves gave her a dark stare, but said nothing.

The leaders of the government were silent, as well, their expressions weary.

Only Soul Reaper did not seem concerned.

"It is a bit funny to hear a member of Clan Valor lecture us about morality and compassion, but fine. That is indeed a viable reason, albeit a rather weak one. What else?"

Morgan shrugged and looked at Saint Thane, the Dream Merchant — the flamboyant Transcendent of ambiguous inclinations who sat next to the Chancellor, visibly anxious.

"Well, venerable Saint Thane here helped us hide the departure of the Ivory Island from Bastion before. Considering that, Clan Song might have already assumed that the government is allying itself with the Sword Domain… who's to say that they aren't preparing measures to punish you all for that perceived sleight as we speak?

Since you are already under threat of being punished for the crime you did not commit, you might as well go ahead and commit it."

Saint Thane's heavily mascaraed and painted eyes widened.

"That… you, you forced me! You had leverage because of the assassination incident!"

Morgan shrugged nonchalantly.

"The fact of the matter is that it did happen, and those Song sisters are quite vindictive."

Sparing the indignant Saint a smile, she looked back to Soul Reaper Jet and added in a serious tone:

"The most important reason, though… is that I have something that

you desperately need."

Soul Reaper raised an eyebrow.

"Oh?"

Morgan nodded.

She remained silent for a few moments, and then smiled.

"...I have the remnants of the House of Night."

Instantly, there was dead silence in the chamber.

Her expression did not change.

"They are all in my care, including a considerable number of surviving Ascended. You should have been panicking about that just before I arrived, more than anything else. Don't you need them the most to guide naval convoys across the ocean? Without the Nightwalkers, the infrastructure of the waking world will suffer irreparable damage. And I am the one who controls them now."

Morgan looked at Soul Reaper, then at the Saint Cor, and finally at the Chancellor.

"Considering the nature of my enemy, I don't have much use for them. Sending them to fight that man will only make him stronger. But… I do need powerful Transcendent warriors to help me defend my father's Domain."

There was a long stretch of silence. Morgan remained motionless, her body relaxed. Her expression did not betray any emotion.

Eventually, the Chancellor let out a heavy sigh.

"With how many Awakened have been taken away by the war, the situation in the waking world is dire as it is. Someone has to defend the population centers against the opening Gates and lead our troops. So… three. Three of the government Saints will lend you their support, Lady Morgan. No more."

She studied him for a moment, then nodded with grace and decorum.

"Pleasure doing business with you, Chancellor. Time is of the essence, so forgive me if I don't linger to attend the formalities. I'll be taking those three Saints immediately."

The man stared at her darkly for a bit.

"...The pleasure is all mine, Lady Morgan."

Neutrality, indeed, was a myth.

If it had not been before, it was now.

Chapter-1868: Expedition Force

The encampment of the expedition force was much different from the base camp of the Sword Army.

It was busy and immense, too, surrounded by a palisade and with countless Awakened guarding its walls. However, its scale was much smaller, and there were no permanent buildings — the encampment moved with the soldiers, who pushed deeper into the lethal expanse of Godgrave every few days.

There was no Ivory Tower or Dream Gate, either, so nothing obscured the sight of the cloudy sky. The radiant clouds were always there, above the soldiers, reminding them that that fiery death was only a gust of wind away.

The stretch of the bone plain between the advancing army and its main camp had been cleared of the predatory jungle. The jungle had been defeated, subjugated, and burned to ashes.

The fissures leading to the Hollows, the source of the scarlet infestation, were now surrounded by garrisons of human soldiers. Those soldiers served as ruthless eradicators, continuously destroying the tendrils with which the jungle desperately reached toward the surface again and again.

Denied the light and warmth, the starving Hollows were already changing. The Death Zone would launch a counterattack on the human invaders one day soon, no doubt — but by that time, the authority of the Sovereigns would already spread into the depths of the dead god's bones. Therefore, the dreadful Hollows would be subjugated, as well.

Sunny, Nephis, and the Saints of the Sword Army moved swiftly from one extermination outpost to another, reaching the expedition force encampment in a few hours — the same journey would have taken

Awakened soldiers many days, but they possessed much greater speed.

The current location of the camp was close to the edge of the Collarbone Plain, in the spot where the Eastern First Rib passed below it. So, Sunny could see a sea of vermilion leaves stretching south far below him, connected to something that looked like an ascending mountain range in the distance.

That was the great Breastbone Reach — the goal of the expedition force.

The Sword Army could have followed the collarbone west to where it eventually connected to the Reach, but crossing to the First Rib and traversing it would save them several days of grueling combat. So, a lengthy lift was currently being constructed on the bone slopes, leading all the way to the jungle below.

The jungle itself was aflame, and a wall of smoke was rising from it into the radiant clouds.

Godgrave was a sweltering place despite the overcast sky, but here, the air was even more sultry. Sunny could feel beads of sweat rolling down his skin under the stonelike carapace of the Onyx Mantle — most of the Saints had dismissed the outer layers of their armors, wearing light clothes, but sadly, he could not follow their example.

He could enjoy the view of Nephis out of her latest suit of plate armor, though, which was a consolation.

Sunny spared a glance to the burning expanse of the First Rib, and then followed her into the encampment.

The mood here was much more heavy and subdued than in the base camp. The authority of the King of Swords did not spread this far west, so the soldiers were on their own. There were tents and temporary buildings, but many were simply sitting on the ground, covered in soot and with exhausted gazes. Dents and cracks covered their armor, and many were smeared with dried blood.

Those with serious wounds would have been tended to by the

healers, but minor scrapes were not worth the waste of essence — at best, they would receive mundane treatment. The injuries and the fatigue slowly accumulated, as did the mental trauma of having to battle the dreadful abominations of the jungle every day.

The lack of nighttime, meanwhile, was wreaking havoc on people's sleep and perception of time.

Everyone here could not wait for their turn to rotate back to the main camp of the army, where they could rest and recover in relative safety, away from the nightmarish, incessant dread of the scarlet infestation.

'It does not seem like they know.'

The news of Mordret's invasion of the Sword Domain had not reached the expedition force, yet. Once it did, the mood of the soldiers would plummet ever further.

For now, though, they were glad and relieved to see the Saints return.

Nephis walked across the encampment confidently, responding to the salutes of the soldiers with an occasional nod.

Soon, they reached the command tent, which was mercifully cooled by a special Memory. Sky Tide and Saint Roan, as well as a few others, were waiting there.

Saint Tyris seemed tired, but her stern demeanor remained the same.

The high officers of the expedition force had been informed of the shift in the command structure of the army and the reason for why Morgan did not return, already. So, Nephis launched into a strategy discussion without a delay.

Time waited for no one.

Her voice was even and commanding, and there was no hint of weakness in her striking grey eyes.

"...In short, we need to accelerate the schedule."

The gathered Saints looked at her with doubt. Eventually, Summer Knight spoke in a subdued tone:

"We are already pushing the soldiers as hard as they can handle. Lady Morgan's absence will undoubtedly take a toll on the overall effectiveness of the army… is it wise to intensify the offensive at this precarious moment? Should we not slow down for a few days, instead?"

Nephis spared him an emotionless glance.

"It would have been a good decision if the circumstances allowed it. However, the situation has changed. We do not have the upper hand in this war anymore, and time is not on our side. Going slow and steady is a luxury that we cannot afford… so, we must act swiftly. I am determined to conquer the first Citadel in no more than three weeks."

The faces of the Saints turned somber.

Summer Knight studied Nephis for a few moments, then grimaced and looked away.

"How do you suggest we keep to that timetable, my lady?"

Nephis looked at the map of Godgrave laying on the table in front of her, then traced a line across the First Rib and the northern part of the Breastbone Reach.

"We might have lost the power of my sister, but the Lord of Shadows is now with us. I can assure you that his strength is quite astounding… therefore, there will be no more lulls in the battle against the jungle."

She faced the Saints and said evenly:

"We will split the expedition force into three war parties. One will be led by me, one by Sir Gilead, and the last one by Lord Shadow. The first party will lead the offensive charge while the other two rest. Every eight hours, a fresh force will replace the spent one. By advancing in three shifts, we will be able to maintain a much faster pace. Additionally…"

She moved her finger to a particular spot on the map.

"We will shift the target area of the expedition from the great fissure near the Third Rib to this minor one close to the Second. The subjugation force will have to travel further through the Hollows in order to reach the assumed location of the Citadel, but it will save us a good week of fighting against the jungle."

There was a wave of whispers among the Saints. They seemed to have accepted Neph's plan, despite its dire implications. However, another issue was on their minds.

Eventually, it was Saint Tyris who spoke, not mixing words.

"We trust you and Summer Knight, my lady. Both of you have proven your competence and valor on countless occasions… however, Lord Shadow is a stranger to us. More than that, he is a mercenary. Why put him in charge of the third war party?"

Nephis met Sky Tide's cold gaze calmly.

Her answer was simple:

"Because none of you can defeat him in a fight. Any more questions?"

The Saints looked at each other silently. After a while, they shook their heads.

Saint Jest of Dagonet gave Sunny a curious gaze.

The old man smiled amicably and asked in a light tone:

"Are you really that great?"

Sunny stared at him from behind Weaver's Mask, then shook his head.

"Who, me? I don't even know how to hold a sword. The pointy end should be aimed at the enemy, right? Or wait… was it the other way around?"

Saint Jest gave him a long look.

"Goodness gracious. Finally! Someone with a sense of humor…"

Chapter-1869: War Machine

A few hours later, the great war machine of the Sword Domain was set in motion. The encampment surged as a myriad of soldiers were called upon by the foreboding rumble of the war drums. Dozens of legions were gathered into march formations and ventured outside the stronghold walls, making the ground shake.

The tents were taken down, the temporary buildings disassembled. Even the tall palisade itself was being dismantled — the sharpened stakes would be transported with the army and raised to form it anew at the next campsite.

Awakened warriors were moving in a strangely orderly chaos. Countless Echoes were on the move, as well — some pulling heavy wagons, some to accompany their masters into battle. The enormous scale and somber spectacle of it all were nothing short of daunting.

Feeling the booming sound of the drums reverberate in his bones, Sunny could not help but let his heart respond to the low, stirring beat. The blood flowed faster in his veins, growing hotter — and yet, a sudden chill brushed against his skin.

He had witnessed the start of the subjugation campaign from the Ivory Island, but he had not observed the expedition force in action until now. It was a grand, grim, and unforgettable scene.

'...Damnation.'

Sunny was no stranger to war, and had participated in his fair share of massive military engagements. But even the most large-scale battle in Antarctica could not compare to the subjugation offensive of the Sword Army in terms of impact, awe, and sheer scale.

Meanwhile, he was meant to be in charge of a third of this grandiose combat force. Sunny was one of the most seasoned fighters of

humanity and had rich experience commanding troops, as well. Still, he spared a few moments to appreciate how bizarre and unsuitable the fact that he had been entrusted with this duty was.

But then again, a war like this one had never happened before. So, there wasn't really anyone fit for this responsibility out there — not in the Sword Army, and not among the enemy champions.

He was no worse than the best of the best.

If there was one glaring flaw Sunny possessed, though, it was that he was not as well integrated into the expedition force as Nephis and Summer Knight were. Luckily, he was in charge of the third war party, which meant that he had sixteen hours to observe the other two in action and familiarize himself with the warriors he would be leading into battle.

The geography itself presented him with a great view of the expanding battlefield. Far below, the jungle covering the surface of the First Rib had already been reduced to ash, and was now spreading anew from the fissures in the ancient bone. One could see with the naked eye an onslaught of vermilion growth devouring the white surface of the lowlands.

The scarlet infestation was spreading from several sources, expanding swiftly in every direction. Here and there, the stains of vibrant red grew large enough to merge, forming vast stretches of the recovering jungle.

Before the jungle could really entrench itself, however, the first war party descended upon it like a tide.

From a distance, the clash between the human invaders and the native horrors of Godgrave seemed immense in scale, but slow and tame. Sunny knew better, however — he had expanded his shadow sense far and wide, so he could feel how fierce and terrifyingly violent the battle was.

The war party consisted of tens of thousands of Awakened warriors, hundreds of Masters, and a dozen Saints. They were stretched along a wide battlefront, advancing steadily to the closest of the fissures.

It was hard to deploy Awakened as a cohesive formation, since every soldier possessed a unique Aspect — in a combat force of that size, they were divided into units based on the general characteristics of their Abilities. Those with physical enhancement powers formed the vanguard, warriors capable of ranged attacks were grouped together, and so on.

The formation was, by necessity, loose and flexible. There were no solid shield walls or tight spear-wielding phalanxes, since a rigid structure would prevent the warriors from fully expressing their Aspects.

Such a manner of deploying troops was optimal, but put a lot of strain on the middle-rank officers, who had to possess both a keen mind and a deep understanding of tactics in order to manage their span of the overall formation with enough finesse.

'...Impressive.'

Fortunately for Sunny, the Sword Army was extremely disciplined and highly capable. Its core, after all, was composed of the seasoned veterans of the Valor Crusades — the famed subjugation campaign that had spanned several decades, bringing many regions of the Dream Realm into human hands.

The Knights and Squires of Valor, as well as many retainers of the vassal clans, were more than familiar with this kind of warfare, albeit maybe not quite on such a scale.

Even though the number of Awakened and Masters had exploded since the Chain of Nightmares, and the seasoned warriors were a minority now, the legions were assembled specifically in a way that put veterans in charge of inexperienced recruits, thus instilling the whole army with the same competency.

The result spoke for itself. The jungle was being slowly, but inevitably, pushed back and incinerated.

After observing the battle for a little while, Sunny concluded that he could become an effective commander of such a force… in theory. Of course, he would need a few months to truly learn the ropes. Sixteen

hours were woefully insufficient to achieve any kind of acceptable result — so, there was no point in trying.

Luckily, he did not really need to.

The middle-rank officers were already more than capable enough to manage the soldiers and keep the formation from falling apart. His role was different — he had to create the conditions for the war party to face the dread of the scarlet infestation from the most advantageous position.

Far below, there were flashpoints of fearsome violence ahead of the steadily advancing formation. These flashpoints were centered around the Saints and the elite forces supporting them — they were the ones who eliminated the most dangerous foes, faced the most dire threats, and made sure that the war party only fought against perils that it could handle.

The bloodiest and most fearsome flashpoint was where Nephis and the Fire Keepers fought. White flames were rolling like waves, and entire swathes of the jungle were obliterated, the corpses of the abominations teeming in the scarlet undergrowth turning to ash.

Nephis moved strategically from one crisis to another, solving them before the danger could befall the main formation. The pace she set was truly unforgiving — she had to face and destroy lethal horrors and insidious hazards without reprieve, one after another.

The dire onslaught of them was both constant and appalling, and even with her great power, she could barely meet the deadly demands of the battlefield. That was why she also directed the rest of the Saints accompanying the war party, sending them to handle those threats that she herself could not reach in time like a nimble conductor.

As long as Nephis did her part well, there was no need for her to personally involve herself with the main formation.

Sunny frowned behind the mask.

He could do that, as well. The problem was that the intensity of the

battle was truly chilling… and while Nephis was holding fast for now, she still had seven hours to go before Summer Knight and the second war party replaced her tired troops.

And this was only the first day of many. The bloodshed would not pause until they crossed the First Rib, ascended the Breastbone Reach, and pushed the jungle far enough south to reach the designated fissure.

By Sunny's calculations, each war party would have to lead the charge at least a dozen times... or, much more likely, north of twenty. Would the soldiers endure the hellish marathon? What about the Saints?

There was another issue, as well…

Nephis had the Fire Keepers to support her and assist the other Saints in her party. A core force of seasoned elites who helped her stay in control of the battlefield. Sir Gilead had a similar group of elites supporting him, as well — the most seasoned and skilled veterans among the Knights of Valor would follow him into battle.

Sunny did not have a force like that, though.

Instead, he had Saint, Fiend, and Serpent…

Chapter-1870: Career Advancement

Eventually, it was Sunny's turn to enter battle.

By then, the expedition force had already pushed the jungle many kilometers away from the slopes of the Collarbone Plain. A temporary camp was established near the system of massive lifts that the army had used to descend to the lowlands, and the soldiers from the first war party were fast asleep despite the suffocating heat, their tired bodies covered in sweat.

Flakes of ash were swirling in the air.

By then, Sunny had replaced Weaver's Mask with [Definitely Not Me], shaping the lesser Memory to resemble the Divine one. After some hesitation, he also commanded it to change the color of his hair to white.

It was a bit nostalgic. The reason for the sudden masquerade was entirely pragmatic, though.

After observing Nephis and Gilead lead their parties into battle, he realized that it was important to not only kill the Nightmare Creatures, but also to be seen killing them by the soldiers — the very sight of their commander fighting could instill the warriors with strength, provided that the commander was a menacing presence on the battlefield.

Both Nephis and Summer Knight were highly visible wherever they went. Nephis had her white armor, silver hair, and blinding radiance. Sir Gilead was simply made of light when he assumed his Transcendent form. Sunny, however, was like a mass of darkness when he fought. Considering his dire mobility, the soldiers would barely be able to tell where he was.

Therefore, he used the enchantment that [Definitely Not me] had inherited from Autumn Leaf to change the color of his hair. Hopefully, that was going to alleviate the problem somewhat.

Sunny had also discussed the upcoming battle with the Saints assigned to his war party. There were eight of them, all hailing from the vassal clans of Valor. He had no prior impression of most of them, except for Saint Rivalen of Aegis Rose — who was the father of the young Master Tristan, whom Sunny had beaten in a duel once.

Saint Rivalen, also known as Shield Wall, possessed an Aspect that excelled in defense and terrain control. Both were useful qualities in a battle such as this, so Sunny had high hopes for him.

He had almost expected that the proud Legacy Saints would be reluctant to obey a stranger with no background like as himself, but they accepted his authority silently. The words spoken by Nephis seemed to have had the desired effect — all Transcendents were warriors tempered by countless life-or-death battles, and those who had met death respected strength above all else.

They were also professionals, and knew the importance of discipline for a military force. In battle, there was no time to second-guess your orders and question your superior — to survive, one had to trust their commanders and hope that those above them knew what they were doing.

Luckily, Sunny was well-versed in all things having to do with slaughter.

The war party set forth long before the agreed-upon time, marched across the scorching surface of the bone, and assembled into a battle formation behind the combat line.

Sunny was giving his last instructions to his Saints:

"...I'll remind you one last time. Remember — this is a marathon, not a sprint. There will be another battle tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that, until we either reach the Second Rib or all die miserable deaths. In fact, the fighting will become much fiercer once we ascend the Reach, since the great Hollow inside it is

much larger, and populated by much more harrowing things."

He stared at them from behind his dark mask.

"Don't be a hero. Preserve your bodies. Conserve your essence. Above all else, safeguard your life… you might think that it is a noble deed, to sacrifice yourself to save a thousand soldiers, but without your strength, ten thousand will die the next day. A living coward is more useful to me than a courageous corpse."

Saint Rivalen gave him a measured look, then sighed and shook his head.

"It's of no use, Lord Shadow. We are of the Sword Domain, which means that most of us have siblings, spouses, children, and friends out there among the soldiers. It is a reasonable thing, to sacrifice a few to save many… but if there is someone you treasure among those few, all reason goes out of the window. It is not a question of courage or cowardice, really, just selfish interest."

Sunny stared at him coldly.

"Keep your selfish interests to yourself, then. As a Saint of the Sword Domain, I expect you to prioritize the needs of the army above your own. If you fail your duty and jeopardize the mission out of misguided sentimentality, I might just kill you — as well as your siblings, spouses, children, and friends — myself."

Saint Rivalen seemed a little indignant. The gallant man ground his teeth silently, then gave him a stiff nod.

"None of us will jeopardize the mission, Lord Shadow."

Sunny looked away.

"Good. Now, prepare…"

He had to follow his own advice, as well. Not the part about staying alive and keeping a cool head, but the part about rationing his essence and treating the battle as a marathon.

Luckily, Serpent was with him, and would be able to replenish plenty

of his essence as they went. However, Sunny still had to be conservative with what he did, and how intensely he fought.

In practical terms, this meant that he would not be summoning the Shadow Shell unless he absolutely needed to, and could not rely too much on Shadow Manifestation. Which was fine… Shadow Manifestation was mostly useful to deal with large amounts of weaker enemies, and he had an entire war party to do just that.

Sunny took a deep breath and looked at the furious battle raging ahead.

"Go!"

The Saints rushed forward.

Retreat was always the trickiest maneuver to perform without letting it descend into a massacre, but the Sword Army was trained well enough to perform it flawlessly.

Once Sunny and his Saints entered the fray, a war horn wailed across the jungle, and the exhausted soldiers of the second war party slowly disengaged, moving back and passing through the ranks of the third party like water through a sieve.

But Sunny did not see any of that.

Gaining terrible speed, he sent a pulse of essence into his muscles and pushed himself off the ground, soaring into an astonishing leap.

He shot over the battle formation of the second war party, the line of Echoes moving in front of it, and a wide stretch of the scarlet jungle beyond, landing with a thunderous boom on the crawling carpet of red moss.

Immediately, there was movement all around him, the jungle coming alive to consume and digest the invader.

Sunny reached into the shadows and pulled a black odachi out of them, raising it into a high stance.

Suddenly, it struck him that the humbly named "war party" was, in

fact, larger than the entire First Evacuation Army, at least as far as the number of Awakened warriors went... and much more powerful.

And he was in charge of the whole thing.

'...If that is not a career advancement, then I don't know what is.'

Sunny extended his shadow sense far and wide, then took a step forward.

'Let's do a good job.'

Chapter-1871: Shadow of Death

Sunny allowed his shadow sense to expand like a tide, enveloping the entire battlefield. The battle line established by the previous two war parties stretched across many kilometers, so an avalanche of information instantly poured into his mind, threatening to overwhelm him.

There were tens of thousands of soldiers, each using a unique Aspect. Awakened, Masters, and Saints. There were countless abominations, as well, ranging from lumbering monstrosities to vast swarms of tiny vermin. There was the jungle itself, too — moving, growing, hungering.

The clash of it all made a myriad of shadows dance in a staggering mayhem of motion, making Sunny draw a heavy breath.

Luckily, he had long learned how to deal with his Transcendent senses. Staying in the outskirts of NQSC had been a harsh lesson, but an effective one — Sunny knew how to cast the net of his perception wide, but only pay attention to important details.

After all, people were not usually overwhelmed by looking at a busy image. They simply saw what they needed to see, and filtered out the rest.

A few heartbeats later, he was aware of what was happening across the entire battlefield. It did put a strain on his mind, but in return, the level of awareness Sunny now possessed was unmatched — a priceless quality for a military commander.

The second war party was retreating, the third party was advancing. Summer Knight and his Saints were disentangling themselves from the enemy and leading their retinues back. In turn, Sunny and his Transcendent champions were supposed to cover their retreat.

'Good. Good…'

Sunny smiled behind the mask.

Life had been so complicated lately, but battle… battle was simple. It was kill or be killed, with nothing between.

The jungle was boiling with abominable life all around him. Even though it had only recently crawled back to the surface from the Hollows, the scarlet foliage was already thick, and all kinds of creatures were rushing in his direction.

His war party had its work cut out for it, but these infantile horrors were not for him to deal with.

Some distance away, spread out in the jungle, the Saints were already engaging with the enemy.

Sunny took another step forward, and his shadows suddenly split, separating into three inky silhouettes.

Then, the inky darkness surged.

A graceful stone knight rose from one shadow, two ruby flames igniting coldly behind the visor of her helmet. She raised her round shield and calmly struck its rim twice with the blade of her black sword.

A towering fiend forged from black silver rose from another, his carapace littered with blade-like spikes. Each of his claws was like a razor-sharp dagger, and infernal flames were burning with hungry malice in his demonic eyes.

Finally, a great serpent slithered from the third shadow, its body like an endless onyx wall. The serpent twisted its neck, which was like a black tower, and its enormous head rose above the jungle, observing the sea of scarlet moss and dense foliage from far above.

A moment later, the three shadows rose from the ground, fusing with Saint, Fiend, and Serpent.

Immediately, there was a change. Saint's armor shone with dark

radiance, and wisps of dark smoke seem to rise from beneath it. The flames burning in Fiend's eyes grew more intense, but were painted a darker and more sinister hue. Serpent, meanwhile, seemed to grow even more solid, the gemlike surface of his onyx scales seemingly absorbing light.

Sunny gestured with his black odachi.

"Go."

Saint silently moved toward the left side of the battlefront. Serpent slithered toward the right side like a torrent of darkness. Fiend remained in place, exhaling two jets of red flame from his nostrils — in the coming battle, he would be the centerpiece of the entire offense.

Sunny, meanwhile, dissolved into shadows.

He had no particular spot in mind for himself. Instead, being aware of the entire battlefield and capable of teleportation, he would be moving from one peril to another and assisting the other Saints.

'Eight hours…'

Eight hours of relentless combat was a little bit too much, even for him. It would have been fine if that was the end, but the push to the Breastbone Reach had only just started. The next couple of weeks would be a hellish trial… one more for his collection of vile ordeals.

'There.'

He sensed it through the shadows — an especially dire presence barreling through the scarlet undergrowth toward the loose formation of the war party, not too far away from him.

The abominations of Godgrave were strange creatures. They were born weak, but became incredibly powerful and ferocious in a matter of days, or sometimes even hours, by battling and devouring each other.

The most fierce, ruthless, and lucky of them became strong enough to descend into the Hollows, away from the annihilating radiance of the

sky, and compete with the dreadful abominations dwelling there for a spot in the nurturing twilight.

The Hollows were so dangerous because there was no natural limit to the lifespan of the Nightmare Creatures there — only their own savage instincts and hunting abilities.

The jungle on the First Rib had been burned away recently with the help of Saint Tyris, so most of the abominations facing the expedition force were still comparatively weak. However, there were exceptional cases even among them. The most dire danger, though, were the old Nightmare Creatures that had lost the competition for food and resources in the Hollows.

Driven by hunger and desperation, they sometimes climbed back to the surface to satiate their hunger by preying on the weaker abominations.

Their situation might have been desperate, but their power and experience could not be underestimated. The Awakened soldiers had no hope of standing in the way of these old monsters, so they had to be eliminated at all costs.

The creature Sunny had sensed was one of these seasoned predators.

Emerging from the shadows, he barred the path of the vile creature. One look at it, and Sunny's expression turned somber.

'A Great Monster.'

The Great Monster was gaunt and weakened, its body covered in festering wounds. Its power seemed to be greatly diminished, and honestly, it looked on the verge of toppling to the ground, dead. The Hollows must not have been kind to this dreadful creature in recent years — or maybe even decades.

But a dying beast was often the most dangerous. There was a feverish gleam in the bloodshot eyes of the abomination, and a hint of predatory cunning in its demented gaze.

Sunny himself, meanwhile, was not in his best state. His three shadows were out there accompanying Saint, Fiend, and Serpent, so

he was devoid of any augmentations. All he had was his raw strength as a Transcendent Terror.

And his skill.

And, of course…

'My will.'

He was the shadow of Death, after all. If he willed something to die, his determination had to be worth something.

'Then, die.'

Chapter-1872: Burning Bright

The Great Monster resembled an enormous, emaciated tiger with black fur and red stripes. No… the red markings on his gaunt body only looked like stripes. In truth, they were festering wounds that revealed vibrant red flesh and the sprouts of tall, blood-red grass growing from the rotting meat.

There were motes of crimson light drifting above the grass, made pale by the radiance of the Cloudveil. Those motes were living beings — tiny fireflies that fed on the Monster's blood and propagated in his infested flesh. Sunny felt a wave of revulsion wash over him when he recognized the vile nature of the beautiful shimmer.

The great tiger must have looked breathtaking once, in the dim twilight of the Hollows. But now, it had been reduced to this ghastly and hideous state.

At the same time, Sunny felt a pang of regret.

He wanted to learn the creature's name. But, sadly, the Nightmare Spell was silent — once he killed the enemy, its familiar voice would not whisper into his ear, revealing a hint of the Great Monster's story.

He had never seriously considered it, but it was really a shame, to kill enemies without learning anything about them.

At least their shadows remained in his Soul Sea as silent reminders that their masters had existed once.

He almost called upon Cassie to ask her to take a look at the Great Monster, but then abandoned that thought. She must have been busy with her own important tasks — now that Mordret was on the verge of ravaging the Sword Domain, Clan Valor would lean heavily on their Seneschal and best diviner.

Even though Cassie could not see the future anymore, her Aspect was still capable of revealing the secrets of the present and the past to her.

So, he did not want to bother Cassie unless the enemy he had to deal with was at least a Devil. With those, knowing about their unholy powers in advance could mean the difference between life and death.

A Great Monster, meanwhile, was nothing more than a dreadfully powerful, rabid animal. The world might bend to its will, but that will could not be too sophisticated.

This one in particular was severely weakened, on top of that.

'Fiend…'

Making sure that the Great Monster's bloodshot eyes caught the sight of him, Sunny raised the odachi and dashed forward. He was weaker and slower than the abomination — but that did not matter.

Because he could sense the movements of the Monster's shadow, and dive into its corrupted mind. Using Shadow Dance, he could somewhat guess where the tiger would strike, and when.

A moment before the giant paw of the mighty tiger shattered his armor and broke his body, Sunny turned into a shadow and slid under the terrible claws. A moment later, he assumed his corporeal form again and delivered a swift strike to the chest of the enormous creature.

His odachi did not deal a lot of damage, but it did cut deep — he had aimed for one of the open wounds on the body of the abomination, bypassing the adamantine barrier of its tough hide.

His goal was not to deliver the black tiger a serious wound. Instead, he just wanted to bring it pain.

And bring it he did.

The Great Monster let out a tortured, demented roar. A split second later, Sunny was already dashing back — he had gotten too close to the emaciated creature, and especially to the beautiful motes of red

light drifting in the air around it.

Sunny was wary of the tiger, but he was much more wary of the crimson fireflies. In fact, he wanted to avoid being near them as if they were a plague.

He landed on the moss a few dozen meters away from the abomination and raised his odachi again, attracting its attention. Before, the Great Monster was looking at him as if Sunny was food… but now, there was pure hatred in its frenzied gaze.

'Good… come on, come get me…'

The giant tiger lunged forward. This time, instead of advancing to meet it, Sunny retreated instead.

He fled across the scarlet jungle, evading a barrage of lethal attacks. The tiger was like a hurricane of bloodred darkness, devastating everything in its path. The white surface of the ancient bones resisted its dire might and its sharp claws, but everything else was obliterated — the moss, the vines, the young trees, and even the weaker Nightmare Creatures.

Only Sunny remained unscathed, leading the Great Monster away from the war party. On the way, they passed Rivalen of Aegis Rose — the gallant Saint was engaged in a battle against a Corrupted Tyrant and its newborn minions, single-handedly holding the entire swarm back. He was not dealing the Tyrant any damage, but he was also preventing it from reaching the soldiers.

Noticing the rolling wave of destruction and the terrifying silhouette of the giant tiger at the heart of it, as well as the white hair of the Lord of Shadows dancing in the wind, Saint Rivalen froze for a short moment.

His eyes widened a little.

"A… A Great Nightmare Creature… he's fighting it alone?"

Then, he had no time to be distracted anymore.

However, just then, a cold voice reached him from a distance...

The Lord of Shadows was eerily calm, considering his dire situation.

"Hold tight, Shield Wall! I'll come to assist you in a little while."

Then, the terrible monster and his slippery prey moved out of sight.

Sunny was sweating under the Onyx Mantle. Actually, it was quite incredible… that armor granted him an unreasonably high resistance to the elements, and he was a Saint on top of that. Despite that, the suffocating heat of Godgrave made him sweat more than he had in the last four years.

It was as if the incandescent abyss above and the heat emanated by its ruthless radiance did not care about the natural course of things.

'Ah… how annoying…'

Sunny dashed back to avoid another furious attack of the black tiger. The abomination shot past him, landed on the moss, and spun around like a deadly whirlwind. Its tail whipped in the air, toppling dozens of twisted trees.

At that moment, however… Sunny slipped.

He seemed to lose balance as his leg slid awkwardly, and at the same time, blades of scarlet grass crawled up the polished onyx of his greave, rooting him in place. He tried to free himself, but fruitlessly — it seemed that, for the moment, he was trapped.

The Great Monster lunged at the helpless prey…

'Just where I wanted you.'

And then, a towering figure of polished black silver exploded from the jungle, colliding with the creature's side.

Fiend tore into the flesh of the Great Monster with all his four hands, easily slicing through its adamantine hide with dagger-like, glowing red claws. The black tiger let out an agonized wail as he was ruthlessly butchered.

Sunny would have had to work harder to achieve the same result, but

in theory, he was capable enough to cut down the Great Monster himself.

However…

Those crimson fireflies were giving him a very, very bad feeling. He was not only worried about himself, but also about the soldiers that would pass the carcass as the offensive continued.

Therefore, he had lured the abomination toward Fiend.

Sunny's personal Supreme Devil, meanwhile, opened his terrifying maw. More infernal glow spilled from it, and then, he breathed out a powerful stream of sinister red flame. The hellish fire enveloped the convulsing tiger, vaporizing its blood, incinerating its flesh, turning the sprouts of crimson grass to ash, and most importantly of all, annihilating the swarm of beautiful fireflies.

Sunny stopped pretending to be trapped and easily tore his leg free.

Sensing a trickle of shadow fragments pour into his soul, he smiled darkly.

'That's better…'

Chapter-1873: Shadow Commander

Of course, the battle did not end with the death of the appalling Great Monster — it was only just beginning. Sunny remained calm and collected as he extended his senses across the vast battlefield, submerging himself into its violent immensity, and determined his next prey.

In moments like these, he had to be strategic. Every step had to be deliberate, every action had to be precisely calculated. He had to be effective, but above that, he had to be efficient — both in his own actions and in how he used the people and tools at his disposal. Otherwise, the battle formation would not be able to contend against the overwhelming force of the enemy sooner or later.

The authority vested in him was great, but the threat facing the war party was greater. If he wanted his army to prevail, he had to be surgical in how he moved around the battlefield and had to command his champions with both finesse and foresight.

Luckily, Sunny already possessed a decisive advantage when compared to other generals — his detailed, comprehensive, and instantaneous awareness of everything that was happening on the battlefield. While not as blatant as his other powers, his shadow sense was a miraculous ability. It was, perhaps, the one power that made him seem like a demigod the most.

'...I'm a general now?'

Sunny left the smoldering remains of the Great Monster behind and rushed to his next appointment. It was to help Shield Wall deal with the Corrupted Tyrant that the Saint was struggling against — which would take a few minutes, at most.

After that, the battle turned into a blur.

He moved across the battlefield like a shadow, emerging from the darkness to clash with the most dangerous foes spawned by the scarlet infestation.

Ghastly beasts, vast swarms of abominable vermin that flowed like a tide, grotesque plants that sprawled across hundreds of meters, waiting for prey to walk into their hungry maws or grabbing them with thorny vines… after a while, Sunny felt his curiosity wane.

He could not even be bothered to remember the endless parade of deadly horrors he had to destroy, let alone wonder what they were called. All he wanted was to cut them down as swiftly and safely as possible, then move on to the next crisis.

As time went on, Sunny was drawn into the cadence of the battle. He should have grown tired, moving slower and with more caution — but instead, he had only become more ruthless, deadly, and domineering. His black odachi was like a harbinger of death and devastation.

Wherever the figure in onyx armor appeared, severed corpses fell to the ground, and blood flowed like a river, quenching the boundless thirst of the scarlet moss.

He felt as if rust was falling off his joints, tendons, and mind. It had been a long time since he had an opportunity to temper himself in this kind of combat — dire, daunting, and relentless. Most importantly of all, he was fighting alone, devoid of the support of his Shadows and any augmentation.

Sunny had grown used to relying on his overwhelming strength in the last few years. His strength was usually enhanced manyfold by the shadows, Saint and Fiend were always fighting by his side, and more often than not, he faced his enemies while embraced by the soothing darkness of a Shadow Shell.

It was such a change of pace, to face death armed with nothing but his sword, his skill, and his cunning once again. Such a battle was a dire challenge, but not an unwelcome one… rather, it was strangely

nostalgic. Sunny was almost enjoying himself — or rather, he would have if not for the fact that there was no space in his mind for any unnecessary emotion or thought.

His mind was on the verge of overloading, as it was. In this state of extreme and endless mental strain, everything became sharper, clearer, and more vivid. The past and the future disappeared, leaving only the present to exist. People often called it a state of flow — however, Sunny did not agree with such a definition. The word flow suggested something calm and tranquil, like smooth water.

But what he felt was harsh and violent, full of a furious desire for destruction.

Like raging flame.

'Let's burn, then…'

The world around him was burning, anyway.

As the war party advanced forward, the soldiers set the scarlet infestation aflame. There was no other way to destroy it — no matter how many Nightmare Creatures the soldiers killed, no matter how many trees and slithering vines they cut down, the jungle itself was a ghastly predator. Every blade of grass and tuft of moss was either deadly itself or was potentially hiding a lethal threat.

Therefore, each legion had at least one centuria composed of Awakened with a high affinity to fire. Their job was to cleanse the white bone surface from the scarlet infestation after the worst of the fighting was done.

The war party clashed with the Nightmare Creatures, cut them down, then set the jungle aflame and advanced once the scarlet taint was reduced to embers and ash.

The air was suffused with unbearable heat.

Sunny and the Saints, however, were fighting ahead of the battle formation. Therefore, they often found themselves surrounded by smoke and fire, fighting the most dreadful abominations amidst the burning jungle. The world was like a dark, fiery hell… if hell was

sprawled on the bones of a dead god and wanted to consume them.

Despite that, the eight Saints under Sunny's command remained undaunted. He had to give credit where credit was due — these men and women were made from sterner stuff. Even though even a Transcendent was not safe in the dreadful hell of Godgrave, and all of them were struggling to contend with the dire perils of the scarlet jungle, none flinched in the face of danger.

Instead, they held fast and tenaciously overcame one nightmarish challenge after another, showcasing stalwart excellence.

Each was a force to be reckoned with… better yet, each was unique, possessing powerful Aspects, mighty Transcendent forms, and fearsome battle arts — especially the minority of them who had become Saints before the Chain of Nightmares, and had therefore spent much more time coming into their power.

Sunny was not arrogant enough to tackle every obstacle personally. He knew that he had to pace himself, but more importantly, he knew to use the best available tool to solve a problem.

Just like in the case of the Great Monster he had slain at the start of the battle, the fact that he could defeat an enemy did not mean that he was the best person to do so. His Aspect was inherently flexible, but depending on the situation, someone else could very well be a more optimal choice to deal with it — like Fiend had been in the clash with the Black Tiger.

Sunny was not a lone warrior today. He was a commander.

Therefore, he used the tools at his disposal — the Saints — with calculated finesse and frugal efficiency. Time, effort, and human lives — those were the resources he could not waste, and had to make sure that as little of them as possible was expended.

…Of course, the most effective tools at his disposal were his Shadows.

Chapter-1874: Lord's Lieutenants

Sunny did not shy away from using the power of his subordinate Saints, but there was a limit to how effectively he could handle them. After all, they were spread across the long frontline — even though he could move with startling speed, he still had to reach a Saint and explain what he wanted them to do, which took time.

His Shadows, however, answered his mental command and knew exactly what he wanted from them without the need to use words. In addition to that, each of them was also more fearsome than any of the Saints under Sunny's command.

Therefore, they acted as the three pillars of the entire offensive, moving ahead of the soldiers to defend them from the more powerful foes.

Unlike Sunny, who moved constantly from one threat to another, his Shadows mostly remained in rigid positions relative to the battle formation of the war party, and drew the threats to themselves instead.

Saint defended the left wing of the battle formation. The graceful stone knight fought with methodical and ruthless precision, but left utter devastation in her wake. Her black blade was elegant and chillingly lethal, using the least amount of effort and motion to deliver fatal wounds to the Nightmare Creatures attacking her in a constant flood.

Her shield, on the other hand, was barbarous and savage. When it was not blocking an onslaught of devastating blows, it was crushing and mangling the bodies of abominations like a wrecking ball made of pure darkness. Its black surface was slick with blood, and its rim had a few dents in it — however, her shield did not yield, just like

Saint did not yield.

Her movements seemed unhurried, but somehow, the tide of abominations that would have drowned anyone else never seemed to overwhelm her. She moved through it with indifferent grace, and severed bodies fell to the ground everywhere she went.

Blood flowed, severed limbs and mutilated corpses littered the smoldering moss, and frenzied roars shattered pitifully against her cold, indifferent silence.

Serpent defended the right wing of the battle formation. Its presence was not the most striking, but it was the most eerie — Sunny's soul companion rarely stayed in one shape for a long time, switching between them to respond to the situation in the most fitting way.

Sometimes, a giant onyx snake slithered through the burning jungle, swallowing weaker abominations or coiling its great body around the towering monstrosities to suffocate them in its crushing embrace. Sometimes, a fleeting human silhouette would appear, moving through the darkness to face unknown dangers.

Sometimes, the shape of a hideous Nightmare Creature would reveal itself in the smoke, tearing other abominations apart. There was only one trait that all of these beings shared — their figures were inky-black and surrounded by shadows.

Serpent was not as perfectly suited for mayhem and carnage of battle as Saint and Fiend were, perhaps, but it easily made up for any deficiencies with endless flexibility.

More importantly than that, Serpent served a vital purpose — with each enemy it killed, a little bit of Sunny's essence was restored. Therefore, Serpent's value was not limited to the Nightmare Creatures it defeated. It contributed to each kill Sunny made, as well.

…And lastly, there was Fiend.

At the moment, Fiend was the most powerful of the Shadows. As a Supreme Devil, his power was vast and dreadful, and for that reason, he played the main role in today's battle.

Fiend defended the center of the war party and was the tip of the wedge formed by Saint, Serpent, and the eight Transcendent champions. His position was deeper in the jungle than that of everyone else, and therefore, he drew the most enemies to himself.

And when the enemies found him, he ripped them to shreds in the most gruesome and frightening fashion.

Towering at five meters in height, with a body made of polished black silver and infernal flames, he was like a dreadful demon who had crawled from the depths of hell. The edges of his dagger-like claws were suffused with an incandescent red glow, cutting flesh and bones like butter. The blood of the creatures he killed boiled and evaporated before touching the ground.

Fiend was savage and brutal, reveling in bloodshed as he tore his enemies apart with bare hands — which he had four of — but that did not mean that there was no sophistication to his seemingly frenzied slaughter. It was, in fact, a chillingly calculated and shrewd affair merely masquerading as mindless barbarity.

He not only retained the devious cunning and diabolical intelligence of his original self, but had also been taught by Saint. It was just that Fiend had no need for weapons, so the style she had taught him was predominantly centered around hand-to-hand combat.

When his claws and spikes littering his powerful steel body were not enough, Fiend unleashed his infernal flames, breathing out long jets of crimson fire. Countless abominations died in agony, incinerated by it, or were scorched so badly that slicing them open presented no problem to the ravenous Shadow.

And even then, he was holding back. Due to the nature of his task, Fiend had to plant himself in the middle of the burning jungle and lure the enemies to him, so he was not using Shadow Step at all — with it, he would have been even more deadly.

There was another trait that made Fiend especially terrifying, though. This one was utterly invisible, but had an undeniable effect on the flow of the battle.

It was his will. As a Supreme creature, Fiend's will had an effect on the world — perhaps not as drastic as that of the Great Nightmare Creatures due to his young age and personality, but still quite real.

More than that, Sunny strongly suspected that Fiend's [Lucky] Attribute somehow fused with the influence of his will, which was why even more things went according to how the bastard wanted them to go.

Perhaps that was the reason why so many of the most powerful foes emerging from the jungle ended up targeting the ravenous Shadow instead of going directly for the battle formation.

Of course, Sunny did not know whether that happened because Fiend really wanted to perform his duty well... or because he simply wanted to eat them.

The battle raged on. The jungle burned, and the war party slowly advanced forward, pushing the scarlet infestation further and further back.

The harrowing orgy of violence seemed to have no end, boiling and seething under the cloudy expanse of the radiant sky.

Chapter-1875: End of Shift

The soldiers of the third party had been anxious before the battle. Of course, they were — Godgrave was like a feverish nightmare, and most of them had already witnessed the chilling horrors of the scarlet jungle. Now, with Princess Morgan gone and the Sword Domain itself in jeopardy, an air of doubt and uncertainty hung over the army.

However, the main reason for their anxiety was the identity of their commander.

The Lord of Shadows had a fearsome reputation and looked frightful, enough to inspire confidence in his martial prowess. He had survived alone in Godgrave for many years, after all — surely, a man like him was perfectly suited to be placed in charge of a war party.

But those were just rumors and second-hand knowledge. In truth, none of the soldiers truly knew him or had seen him fight — except for the Fire Keepers serving Lady Changing Star, no one had. He was a stranger, and therefore, it was hard to trust in his ability to lead them into battle.

When the battle did start, however…

The doubts of the soldiers were alleviated in the most striking way.

A sense of silent astonishment came to replace them.

The third war party had a perfect view of the moment when the Lord of Shadows leaped over the battle formation and dove into the depths of the jungle without showing any kind of fear or hesitation. An infuriated roar resounded from the spot where he had landed, and dozens of trees toppled, hinting that a scene of terrible carnage was happening out there, not too far ahead.

After that, they only caught glimpses of him.

The figure encased in an intricate suit of onyx armor seemed to be… everywhere. It was as if he was in several places at the same time. The soldiers did not know how their commander managed to move across the vast length of the battlefield with such speed, but he always appeared where he was needed the most.

His white hair danced in the air, and his black odachi struck true without fail, bringing the most dreadful Nightmare Creatures down to the ground. It was as if he was a messenger of death, reaping the lives of their enemies with cold and emotionless ruthlessness.

The soldiers were busy fighting their own foes to pay what was happening ahead much attention, at first. An endless tide of abominations rushed at them from the scarlet jungle — there were not enough words in the human language to describe the appalling hideousness of them all, and no time to discern the horrid details to their appearance.

Instead of gawking at the Nightmare Creatures, the warriors of the Sword Army strained their bodies and minds to the absolute limit in order to survive.

Clouds of arrows fell into the moving carpet of abominations. Aspect powers rained from above, tearing hideous bodies apart. Thousands of Awakened warriors clashed with the enemy in melee, desperately trying to block the avalanche of claws and fangs with their shields while slaying the creatures with their enchanted blades.

Masters served as the cornerstones of the battle line, rallying the Awakened around them. The officers bellowed orders, adjusting the formation and rotating fresh centuriae to the front. A terrible cacophony of screams, screeching wails, and roars enveloped the battlefield...

The war machine was churning, grinding humans and Nightmare Creatures alike to dust.

Once a wave of enemies was eradicated, the jungle was set aflame. Ash danced in the air, and unbearable heat washed over the sweating soldiers like a suffocating cloud. Pushing away the corpses of the dead abominations, they marched forward in pursuit of the flame.

All the while, the grey sky above shone with diffused, but blinding radiance. The soldiers knew that Saint Tyris of the White Feather clan was present to protect them from the incandescent white abyss… and yet, it was still a terrifying feeling, to know that only a brittle veil of clouds stood between them and certain death.

The soldiers were only able to maintain composure because what they were witnessing overwhelmed their sense of fear. Fear was a finite emotion, after all once a certain threshold of terror was reached, it lost all meaning.

Nevertheless…

After a while, the fighters of the war party noticed that something strange was going on.

Their dire and horrific assault on the scarlet jungle... was going too smoothly.

They had already experienced fighting against the jungle while traversing the Collarbone Plain, so they knew what to expect. The battle was terribly strenuous and ghastly, yes. People were dying, either killed by the frenzied Nightmare Creatures or by the scarlet infestation itself. And yet, too few of them were losing their lives.

The reason was simple — it was because nothing they couldn't deal with reached the battle formation.

There were extremely powerful Nightmare Creatures hiding in the jungle, even if its current incarnation was only a day or two old. There were indescribable hazards, as well.

However, the only abominations that attacked the war party were those that could be dealt with by Awakened and Ascended.

It wasn't long until the soldiers realized why...

It was because of the Lord of Shadows.

Their unfamiliar, cold, and sinister commander was much more competent than what they had ever expected him to be.

Slowly, the war party came to realize why Lady Nephis had put the Hermit Saint of Godgrave in charge.

He was like a force of nature... a walking calamity for those who found themselves on the wrong side of his merciless blade.

As the battle raged on, the soldiers witnessed more of what he did, as well.

Their eyes widened, and their spirits slowly surged.

The Lord of Shadows was swift, decisive, and incredibly lethal. In fact, he was deadlier than any Saint was supposed to be. His sword knew no mercy, and did not care about whom it cut down — be it Tyrants, Terrors, or even the mythical Great Nightmare Creatures, just one of whom could potentially devastate an entire continent in the waking world.

He did not seem to be using any special powers, either — except for his uncanny ability to dissolve into the shadows and move across the battlefield in an instant. All he had was his personal strength, his skill with the sword, and his devious will.

That alone was enough to bring even the most powerful abominations to their knees.

If there was one thing that made the Lord of Shadows appear as a demigod, it was that he seemed nearly omniscient. No enemy could get past him, and no peril could escape his attention. It was that miraculous ability to perceive everything, everywhere, all at once that allowed him to defend the battle formation flawlessly.

Not only was the Lord of Shadows fearsome, but he was also inescapable. More than that, he possessed keen intelligence and profound foresight that allowed him to rule the battlefield like a ruthless tyrant, coldly and methodically eradicating the threats facing the war party.

And then, there were the three dreadful Echoes following his will.

The graceful knight. The steel devil. The serpentine shadow.

Each of them was powerful enough to contend with a Saint... and the most valiant of Saints, at that.

With them serving as the pillars of the offensive and their master conducting the battle with his dark blade, the third war party was in high spirits. The soldiers steeled their hearts and hardened their resolve, slaughtering the Nightmare Creatures and cleansing the surface of the ancient bone from the scarlet infestation.

Their exhaustion mounted...

But their commander was still out there, in front of them, fighting in the burning jungle without showing any sign of fatigue or hesitation.

His fearsome mask remained emotionless. His black blade never lost its edge. His onyx armor was unbroken, and not a drop of his blood fell into the scarlet moss.

By the end of the eight hours the war party had been supposed to battle the jungle, a choir of exhilarated cries rose above the rows of soldiers.

Chapter-1876: Third Pillar

The eight Saints that had followed the enigmatic Lord of Shadows into battle were both rattled and elated. The battle was a gruesome ordeal, but they had expected that much.

What they did not expect was to learn just how powerful their sinister commander had turned out to be.

The Lord of Shadows was a singular existence because, unlike the rest of them, he was not a vassal of the King of Swords. He was a mercenary Saint that Lady Nephis had somehow convinced to pledge his blade to the Sword Domain's cause — therefore, she knew him best. So, nobody had doubted her promise that they would not be able to defeat him in a fight.

Nevertheless, it was a startling shock to witness the Transcendent sellsword in action.

Not only was he immensely powerful and chillingly lethal, he was actually an existence of the same caliber as the other two field commanders of the expedition force — Changing Star herself and Summer Knight, the most renowned paladin of the Great Clan Valor.

The Saints had thought that the expedition force had two pillars, but now, they knew that there were three.

By the time the shrill wail of the war horn signaled them to retreat, the way they looked at the Lord of Shadows had changed completely.

…Sunny was a little bit amused by their change of attitude.

'I used to live in this damned place alone, of my own free will. What else did they expect? That I'm a weakling?'

Hearing the war horn, he let out a tired sigh and prepared to pull

back.

He could sense Nephis enter the range of his perception, followed by the Fire Keepers. Once she and the other Saints of the first war party advanced, Sunny commanded his Shadows to retreat and followed suit.

Soon, he found himself behind the battle line, surrounded by his eight Transcendent subordinates.

Now that their shift was over, Sunny suddenly felt the weight of fatigue crash into him like a mountain. He was tired, dehydrated, and covered in sweat… it was to the point that he did not know what he wanted to do more, summon the Endless Spring to quench his thirst, or summon it to wash himself.

'In hindsight, Antarctica wasn't that bad. At least it wasn't so damn hot there...'

Dismissing his Shadows to let them mend the scrapes they had received in the nurturing darkness of his soul, Sunny gazed at the exhausted Saints and raised an eyebrow behind the mask.

"What are you waiting for? Retreat to camp. We only have sixteen hours to recover before the second round starts."

Rivalen of Aegis Rose sighed.

"...You really know how to raise morale, don't you, Lord Shadow?"

His usually gallant voice sounded a little bitter.

Sunny stared at him coldly.

"Why yes, I do. I doubt you'll like my methods, though."

Shield Wall almost seemed to shiver, then looked away with a cough.

Not paying him any more attention, Sunny headed in the direction of the distant camp. His armored boots scraped against white bone.

The stretch of the First Rib they were crossing had been enveloped by

the scarlet jungle before his war party cleansed it. There was ash in the air, and piles of burned abomination corpses were smoldering here and there.

Once the battlefront moved further away, someone would arrive to harvest soul shards from them — but for now, the carcasses simply carpeted the ground, helping one realize just how terrible the battle had been.

Sunny sighed.

'It is only the first day.'

Soon, they reached the line of tired soldiers. The warriors were covered in soot and dead-tired, but their sunken eyes were shining brightly.

For some reason.

The war party was in the process of assembling into a march formation, but when Sunny and the Saints approached, everyone paused for a few moments.

He felt thousands of gazes wash over him like a tide, and then, a deafening cheer rose above the sea of soldiers.

Surrounded by a crowd of cheering soldiers, Sunny felt a cold chill run down his spine, and a sudden sense of dread grasp his heart with icy claws.

He almost stumbled.

It was because he recognized their chant.

"...Glory! Glory! Glory!"

Sunny's face was hidden behind a mask, so no one could see his expression. The shadows populating the battlefield moved as he halted and gazed at the soldiers silently.

He remained motionless for a few long moments, and then continued walking.

"Move out!"

His voice was colder than the frozen depths of hell.

The cheer exploded in volume briefly and then died out. The tired warriors followed their general across the corpse-littered battlefield back to camp.

'Ah, how bothersome…'

Sunny did not have much to do once the war party returned to the base of the dead god's collarbone — mercifully, he did not have to handle the minutiae of managing an army out of battle. He simply wanted to dismiss his mask and armor to clean himself and drink some water, but considering the nature of the Lord of Shadows, that was harder to accomplish than it should have been.

In the end, he wasted some essence to step away from the camp through the shadows, refresh himself, and then come back.

His soldiers had eaten and were now asleep — some in the tents, some simply on the ground. Most had dismissed the outer layers of their armors because of the heat, so there was a lot of skin in sight. It was a stark contrast to what he was used to from Antarctica, where everyone had always tried to put on as many layers of clothing on themselves as possible.

Sunny studied the scene of the camp silently, then shook his head.

'...I hate jungles.'

Since the Lord of Shadows did not have to sleep, he walked to the lifts and climbed some way up the slope of the collarbone to observe the distant battle.

To his surprise, there was another figure sitting on the edge of the wooden platform, doing the same.

It was a strikingly handsome man with a valiant profile and a thoughtful gaze. His lake-blue eyes were calm, and his glistening hair was moving slightly in the wind.

Sunny almost failed to recognize Summer Knight out of his lustrous armor, but that angelic beauty was hard to forget.

"Sir Gilead."

He sat down nearby, looking in the direction where Nephis was currently reducing the scarlet jungle to ash.

Summer Knight glanced at him, then turned back.

"Lord Shadow."

The valiant Saint remained silent for a moment before saying in a neutral tone:

"I observed your battle. Your reputation is well-earned."

Sunny smiled crookedly behind the mask.

"You're not so bad yourself."

He paused for a moment, and then added evenly:

"Not as good as me, though."

Sir Gilead chuckled.

He raised a beaten alloy canteen, drank some water, and then looked at Sunny with a subtle smile.

"We'll know who's better once we cross swords. However… I hope we'll never find out."

It could have been a sincere wish, a mild joke, or a veiled threat. Summer Knight took his oaths very seriously, and since he had sworn allegiance to the King of Swords, his loyalty was beyond reproach. He might have had some reservations about the selfish mercenary Saint.

These were the kinds of people Sunny would have to fight one day, if things went wrong.

Glancing at the camp where his subordinate Saints were resting, he wondered how many of them he might have to kill in the future.

In the end, Sunny let out a sigh.

"I hope so, too."

Chapter-1877: Secrets of the Past

Sunny glanced at the valiant man, Sir Gilead, from behind his mask.

Honestly, Summer Knight was not that bad. Back in the Nightmare Desert, he took Morgan away and left the rest of them behind — but before that, he had given away his most precious Memories to Nephis, hoping to help her conquer the Third Nightmare.

He had been reluctant to abandon her and her companions, but his duty had demanded for Morgan to be saved at all costs.

Sunny didn't know what to think of the man.

On one hand, Summer Knight was quite likable — even admirable, in many ways. He was a benevolent warrior who valued loyalty above all else.

On the other hand, that devotion of his made Sunny feel uneasy. He had a personal issue with the concept, and more than that… loyalty was usually seen as a noble virtue, but considering that the subject of Gilead's loyalty was the King of Swords, was it really?

What did it say about Summer Knight that he had chosen to serve a lord like that faithfully?

Sunny often found himself wanting to think about Sir Gilead in the same manner he thought about Harus, the zealous servant of the ruler of the Bright Castle. However, he never quite managed to draw a parallel between the two — no matter how many times he tried, they just felt too different from each other.

So, he was conflicted.

As Sunny was considering the matter, Sir Gilead looked at him once more.

"Can I ask you a question, Lord Shadow?"

Sunny shrugged indifferently.

"You certainly can."

Summer Knight turned his gaze back to the battlefield.

"I heard that you had refused the invitation of Clan Song. However, you did not refuse Lady Nephis, and came to fight under the banner of the Sword Domain with her. I must admit that I am curious as to why."

Sunny traced his gaze and saw a white flash illuminate the world far in the distance. Nephis was unleashing her flames somewhere out there, on the battlefield.

He grinned behind the mask.

His voice was emotionless when he spoke:

"I thought that if it's Changing Star, she would win."

Sir Gilead smiled and drank more water.

"She does have a habit of making impossible things possible. Just like her father."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Broken Sword? You knew him?"

Summer Knight chuckled.

"No… I wish I did, though. He died shortly after I became a Sleeper — but, before that, he was somewhat of an idol of mine."

A sad smile appeared on his face.

"I only grew to admire him more after hearing stories told by those

who had met him. Many of the older retainers of Clan Valor had a good relationship with Broken Sword and Smile of Heaven — after all, they were comrades of the patriarch's son. Smile of Heaven in particular, since she and Lord Anvil practically grew up together."

He sighed.

"It's a shame, what happened to them in the end… but they would be happy, I think, to see how beautifully their daughter has grown up."

Sunny looked at him with doubt.

Did Gilead not know how Broken Sword died, and that Anvil was one of his killers? Well… to be fair, even Sunny himself did not know that. He was only sure that the Sovereigns had engineered Broken Sword's death because they tried to eliminate Nephis later — without that first clue, finding the rest was close to impossible.

It wasn't strange that Summer Knight would not know anything about it. After all, he would have indeed been a teenager when the betrayal happened, just like Saint Tyris.

There was something else about what he had said, though…

Sunny felt a little curious.

"Practically grew up together?"

Sir Gilead seemed confused by the question for a moment, then nodded.

"Yes. There weren't really great clans back then, but a few families were certainly more renowned and powerful than the rest. Lord Valor and Immortal Flame were patriarchs of two such families, so their children were quite close — since His Majesty and Smile of Heaven were more or less the same age, they were childhood friends."

He smiled.

"Sir Jest has many stories about the mischief the two of them got up to. Of course… listening to his stories is not for the faint of heart. Be warned, Lord Shadow!"

Sunny remained silent for a while.

"I see. Thanks for the warning."

It made sense that Anvil and Smile of Heaven had known each other since childhood. Their families were two of the most prominent families of that time, after all. Their parents had been the most distinguished champions of the First Generation, and would have fought side by side many times. The future great clans had been a small and tight-knit circle.

Still, Sunny had not considered that fact before. In truth, he rarely thought about the Sovereigns as real people, if at all. It was strange to imagine that they had been children once, no matter how reasonable such a conclusion was.

In light of the strange revelation, what Nephis had suffered as a child seemed even more vile. Not only had the Sovereigns killed their comrade and tried to hunt down his descendant, but in the case of Anvil, he had even conspired to kill his childhood friend's husband and eliminate her daughter.

Of course, Smile of Heaven had been… gone, by then. Still, it seemed like an extreme shift in attitude.

Just what the hell had happened to them?

It also made sense that Saint Jest would have known the future King of Swords since childhood — he had been a member of the cohort led by the founder of Clan Valor, after all.

Therefore, he would have known Broken Sword and Smile of Heaven, as well.

Maybe he even knew something about how Broken Sword had died, and how Anvil attained Supremacy.

Sunny's expression turned a little grim behind the mask.

He and Cassie were determined to investigate the Sovereigns to learn their Flaws. Getting to the bottom of the Immortal Flame clan's fall was not directly tied to that investigation, but then again, it very well

could be.

There were very few people who knew enough to be a useful source of information for them, and even fewer of those people were within their reach. Saint Jest was one such person.

However, Sunny doubted that the amicable older gentleman would be inclined to share what he knew with them.

'How troublesome.'

He suppressed a sigh and looked at Summer Knight.

'Should I try to pull more information out of him?'

No… it was probably not a good idea, at least not now. Even if he did not really show it, Sir Gilead was already doubting the Lord of Shadows — which was reasonable. A man who put so much value in loyalty had to have reservations about a person who seemingly only cared about self-interest.

So, Sunny could not appear too eager to learn the secrets of the King of Swords. Gilead's convictions might have been naive, but the man himself was no fool. He was carefully scrutinizing his every word, no doubt, evaluating how dependable the Lord of Shadows really was.

For now, Sunny's motives for joining the Sword Army were indeed seen as unclear, and therefore questionable. Not only that, but he had not even pledged his allegiance to Clan Valor itself — instead, he made a pact with Changing Star as an individual.

Should Sunny make his motives seem a little more transparent, and a bit less suspicious?

'Why not?'

He smiled.

"You said that Lady Nephis has grown up beautifully, yes?"

Summer Knight raised an eyebrow, seemingly confused by the sudden question.

"I did."

Sunny stared at him for a few moments.

"Do you think about Changing Star's beauty often?"

His already cold tone grew even chillier at the end.

Gilead blinked a couple of times.

"...Do you?"

Sunny responded evenly:

"Quite a bit."

Summer Knight stared at him in bewilderment for a few moments, then looked away and coughed.

"That… huh… I see. I am sorry to disappoint you, Lord Shadow, but Lady Nephis already has a young gentleman in her heart…"

Sunny grinned behind the mask.

"So what? I hear that he's a pampered fool of a Master. Pleasant to look at, but nothing much beyond that. A useless person."

Sir Gilead coughed again.

"I'm not… I don't think... ah, look at the time. My war party will have to enter battle soon. Actually, I was supposed to perform a few inspections … if you'll excuse me, Lord Shadow."

With that, the valiant Saint rose, gave Sunny a polite bow, and jumped down from the platform. His movements weren't hurried at all.

Sunny watched him leave with a satisfied smile.

'Well, then… that went well.'

After that, the motives of the Lord of Shadows should seem quite clear.

Albeit perhaps just as questionable as before…

Chapter-1878: Interim Results

After Summer Knight left, Sunny remained on the platform, observing the battle that raged in the distance.

The battle was entering an especially fearsome stage due to the fact that the expedition force was nearing one of the cracks in the surface of the First Rib — it was from there that the scarlet infestation was spreading, and therefore, the perils facing the soldiers were more dire in the vicinity of the dark chasm.

Being that close to the Hollows also meant that there would be more old abominations that had crawled to the surface from the dim twilight below — which put much more pressure on the Saints leading the war party, and its commander in particular.

Even from afar, Sunny could tell that Nephis had finally been forced to assume her Transcendent form. He sighed, knowing that it would take a toll on her.

'If I made more progress, she would not have had to.'

At the same time, if he had made less progress, then the burdensome task of besieging the fissure might have become Summer Knight's responsibility. In any case, there was no point in considering such issues and regretting the past.

Sunny hesitated for a while, then briefly summoned his runes.

Shadow Fragments: [1876/6000].

Another sigh escaped from his lips.

It was pitiful. He had barely gained two hundred fragments in the last four or five months… a far cry from the rapid progress he had enjoyed before Transcendence.

'At this rate, it will take me a decade to become a titan.'

The expedition force only advanced after Saint Tyris broke the Cloudveil to incinerate the thriving jungle, then closed it once again. That allowed the soldiers to only face the initial stages of the scarlet infestation and battle Nightmare Creatures that had not reached maturity yet, which made advancing forward easier.

It also meant that no matter how dangerous those immature abominations were, slaying them did not grant Sunny many shadow fragments. The situation would change once the war entered the next stage, spreading across the entire surface of Godgrave and delving into the Hollows — but for now, he couldn't help but feel a bitter sense of disappointment.

He wasn't saturating his cores that much… he wasn't receiving any Memories or Echoes, either. It was all so unrewarding.

Which was not to say that Sunny was not receiving any benefits from participating in the war.

His Transcendent battle art was progressing steadily.

He had already established its main principles a long time ago. Now, he only needed to slowly temper himself in countless battles to perfect it and forge it into his very bones, which he had been doing since the Sword Army ascended to the collarbone of the dead deity.

That was the opportunity that the war had granted him.

Overall, the process was going well.

His essence technique was already all but flawless. His battle style had been rebuilt from the ground up to incorporate his unique advantages into its root principles — the ability to sense shadows and see what was happening behind his back, the tenacious nature of his blood and bones, the power to change the weight of his body and limbs at will, Shadow Step, various forms of Shadow Manifestation…

All of these powers, when incorporated into a combat technique comprehensively, changed it on a fundamental level. Sunny simply needed practice and experimentation to iron out the last kinks and

truly master the art he had designed — the relentless battlefield of Godgrave was a perfect arena to achieve just that.

There was only one element of his Transcendent battle art that he could not practice freely yet. It was the seamless cooperation between multiple avatars that he had envisioned after becoming a Saint — after all, Sunny was hiding that ability of his from everyone except his closest allies.

Well… there was another element, as well. The last element, which had to do with spirit and will. He simply did not know how to approach it and elevate his Transcendent battle art to a Supreme one, so there was no progress on that front.

'I'm still growing stronger.'

Sunny was dissatisfied because of the lack of palpable rewards, but that did not mean that his growth entered a period of stagnation. If anything, his power was growing deeper, as he was shoring up his foundation in preparation for the final, vital leap.

Still, he did not feel like it was enough.

Glancing at the radiant grey sky, Sunny grimaced.

'I need to accelerate the weaving side of the plan.'

He was still working toward creating the soulbound sword for Nephis.

Once that was done, though… he would be able to create a few Memories for himself.

Sunny did not need a weapon or a suit of armor. If there was one thing he desperately lacked, though, it was suitable charms. Both Sunny himself and Saint possessed the power to enhance the enchantments of a chosen charm, but sadly, these powers were remaining unused at the moment.

And while Sunny himself did not need an enchanted weapon, the same could not be said about Saint.

Forging a sword and a shield for his first Shadow was also something he planned on achieving before the war reached culmination.

He also had to create another [Handy Bracelet] for Rain. The Memory alone would be useless for her, since Sunny had no idea about what traits his sister possessed, but if he could get Cassie to read her runes, the missing information could be filled in…

There was a lot for Master Sunless to do while the Lord of Shadows was waging war against the scarlet jungle. Even Rain's teacher was busy with trying to keep her alive now that the seventh legion was braving the surface of the Collarbone Plain — without the help of someone like Saint Tyris, at that.

Shaking his head, Sunny rose to his feet and threw a last glance into the distance.

Even if he did perfect his battle art and succeeded in creating soulbound Memories… the main obstacle facing him and Nephis still seemed as impossible to overcome as it had been before.

They had not found any clues about how to attain Supremacy yet.

'Calm down. The war has only just started.'

Consoling himself with that thought, Sunny took a step back and dissolved into the shadows.

Chapter-1879: Bone Crack

The second war party left the camp, but the first one did not return.

That was because Nephis had conquered the fissure, and for a while, the expedition force was busier than usual.

While Summer Knight and his soldiers clashed with the sprawling jungle, the entire encampment was dismantled and moved forward, chasing the vanguard to the edges of the abyssal chasm.

The great fissure used to look like a jagged wound on the surface of the sun-bleached bone, its terrifying depths full of impenetrable darkness. That darkness was gone now, replaced by a boiling mass of black smoke and brilliant flame. A billowing pillar of smoke was rising into the overcast sky, falling into the stormy clouds.

The great bridge of vines connecting the Hollows to the surface was on fire, but it was stubbornly clinging to life. New sprouts of scarlet growth were shooting out of the smoke, trying to crawl their way onto the surface of the white bone. There was a chain of sweaty soldiers positioned along the edges of the fissure, burning the monstrous saplings down before they took hold.

Looking at the vermilion tendrils slithering out of the crack, Sunny couldn't help but think that they looked like fibers of bloody muscle tissue.

…Perhaps that was what the scarlet jungle truly was — the flesh and tendons of the colossal skeleton that were desperately trying to regrow and envelop its bones once again, but were burned away by the merciless sky before the dead god could rise from its deathbed each time.

Over and over again, for eons…

'What a disturbing thought.'

Sunny arrived near the fissure at the head of the marching column. The camp of the expedition force was relocating here — both to make building an extermination outpost around the chasm easier and to lessen the return time for the troops battling the jungle. The first war party, which had recently finished its shift, did not have to return at all this time.

He left the soldiers behind and walked to the very edge of the fissure, where a lonely figure could be seen, looking at the billowing flames. Nephis had dismissed her Transcendent form and the outer layers of her armor, enduring the suffocating heat in light clothes. Her fair skin was smeared in ash and soot, with beads of sweat glistening on it like tiny jewels.

He glanced into the infernal depths of the burning chasm and then turned to face her.

Sunny remained silent for a moment.

"Did you… melt down your armor again?"

Nephis looked at him with no emotion in her cold, grey eyes.

Eventually, however, a subtle smile twisted her lips.

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

She chuckled, then shook her head.

"No, I was careful. I can't keep requesting new suits of armor from the enchanters of Clan Valor. They are already quite cross with me, to be honest…"

In this camp, wearing this mask, Sunny could not make Nephis delicious food and comfort her, chasing away the emotionless coldness dwelling in her eyes with the warmth of human touch and connection. However, he could at least show her that there was someone she could lean on here.

Master Sunless could do the former, but only the Lord of Shadows

could do the latter.

So, wearing the mask was not all bad in the end.

He sighed, then said with a hint of envy in his voice:

"Well, you are fighting Great Nightmare Creatures every day. I am sure you will receive a durable Memory armor sooner or later."

Nephis looked doubtful.

"Maybe. But haven't you noticed? Now that we are fighting more powerful abominations, the rate at which the Spell bestows us Memories seems to have reduced considerably. I am not even talking about Echoes… I'm not sure I've even seen a Supreme Echo before, except for that silver devil of yours."

Sunny was surprised.

"Really? I... haven't noticed."

He had killed some Great abominations before being erased from the tapestry of fate — the Vile Thieving Bird's Spawn, Daeron of the Twilight Sea... he had received a Memory both times, but then again, Sunny used to be Fated. Chance and probability had always been in a mess around him, before.

Nephis nodded.

"I slowly realized it over the past four years, and these days in Godgrave only confirm that suspicion. Well, it makes sense. It must take more… more of whatever it is that the Spell uses to create Memories and Echoes to fashion them out of truly powerful abominations. One Supreme Memory must be worth ten thousand Awakened ones, so it is being frugal."

There were a million Awakened in the world, but only three Sovereigns. So, her conclusion made sense.

Sunny still felt bitter about not being able to receive bountiful rewards from the Spell, but his bitterness had been alleviated a bit.

'Come to think of it, it's good news for us. Otherwise, with more than a decade to prepare, the Sovereigns would have been drowning in Supreme Memories and Echoes… maybe even Sacred ones.'

They could still possess those, but at least not a vast arsenal of them.

It also made Sunny much more valuable, since his knowledge of weaving was deep enough to craft Supreme Memories, provided he had suitable materials and a few Supreme soul shards.

Looking into the billowing flames, Nephis asked suddenly:

"Do you remember what you felt when you received your first Memory?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow, surprised by the question.

"My first Memory? Well… if I remember correctly, I was full of indignation. Because it was so useless."

He paused for a moment, then added with a smile:

"But after a while, I came to appreciate it. In fact, I value it more with each year that passes. It might not be powerful or useful, but it is a… a memento of the things that I left in the past. Being able to remember is a precious thing, sometimes."

Sunny glanced at Nephis and asked:

"What about you? What did you feel when you received your first Memory?"

She blinked a couple of times.

"Me? Honestly, I was in no state to feel anything when I received it, since it happened at the very end of my Nightmare. But later, when I had time to examine it… I guess I felt humiliated. Because of how glad I was to receive a boon from the Spell."

Nephis sighed.

"That Memory served me well, though. I wielded it for many years.

Across the Forgotten Shore, the Nightmare Desert, and the Underworld... it never betrayed me. These days, it is too weak for me to use, but I still cherish it a lot."

Sunny remembered the Memory Nephis was talking about — the Dream Blade — very well. After all, that sword had saved his life many times.

It had also tasted his blood, mangled his flesh, and caused him terrible pain in the Crimson Spire.

Considering Neph's historic accomplishments, that Awakened Memory of the Sixth Tier had had a spectacular career before retirement.

He chuckled.

"I guess we are both quite sentimental."

Nephis looked at him with a surprised expression. Her sincere confusion was quite endearing.

"Me? Sentimental?"

Sunny smiled.

"I did not specify which sentiments make us sentimental, though… bloodlust is also a sentiment, for example…"

Neph's expression changed slightly.

"Wow. The first thing that came to your mind has to do with lust?"

He froze, trying to think of an answer.

'...That damned Flaw!'

Far away, in the main camp of the Sword Army, Master Sunless stopped what he was doing as well and stared into the distance with a contemplative look.

His eyes narrowed, as if he was considering something.

After a while, he mumbled quietly:

"Dream Blade, huh? That is… promising, I think…"

Chapter-1880: Hell March

The expedition force continued to push into the depths of Godgrave.

The First Rib had a bending shape, so for the first week, they were facing a literal uphill battle. Sometimes, the treacherous slope under their feet was so steep that the fallen soldiers rolled down the bloody ground, crashing into the second row of the battle formation. The unforgiving pace of the offensive was only made more cruel by the difficult terrain and the battering heat.

With each passing day, the scarlet infestation was growing. The jungle was turning more nightmarish, and the abominations populating it were becoming more powerful. However, the soldiers were also growing stronger — those of them who had yet to saturate their cores were absorbing the scavenged soul shards, and many were receiving powerful Memories during the long days of slaughter.

All were gaining valuable experience and growing more used to the dreadful peril of Godgrave.

The main reason why the progress of the expedition force was so swift, though, and why the casualties among the soldiers were not nearly as terrible as they could have been, were the three leaders of the expedition — Changing Star, Summer Knight, and the Lord of Shadows.

Changing Star was like a ruinous herald of annihilation. The battlefield transformed into a radiant, fiery hell when she entered it. Her cleansing flame, her incandescent sword, and her brilliant resolve were both a solace and an inspiration to the warriors of the Sword Army.

Those who saw her fight found strength that they had not known they possessed and raised their swords to follow her without hesitation. More than that, the Memories of those who fought by her

side would be imbued with a newfound power, and all but the most fatal wounds her followers received were quickly healed by her soothing flame.

The first war party was the fiercest, and pushed the jungle back the furthest.

Summer Knight was no less radiant. Woven from light, he was like a beacon that dispelled the darkness of the abominable jungle. Seemingly knowing no fear or hesitation, he barred the path of the most harrowing Nightmare Creatures and cut them down both nobly and valiantly, showing the soldiers what a true knight was meant to be with his own example.

His personal power might not have been as devastating as that of Lady Nephis, but his valor and martial prowess were beyond reproach. He was the most seasoned commander among the three, and led his fellow Saints with the greatest measure of understanding of how to use their powers .

Even though there were more Transcendents in his war party than in the other two, their coordination was just as seamless, if not more so.

The second war party was the most steady and stable, moving forward at a measured pace.

And lastly, there was the Lord of Shadows.

The mysterious Saint of Godgrave was like a dark revelation for the soldiers of the Sword Army. No one had expected him to be this deadly, this ruthless, and this insidious as he rampaged on the battlefield, shifting from shadow to shadow and slaughtering the Nightmare Creatures of the scarlet jungle. His silent ferocity was both chilling and astounding, making his soldiers feel a sense of wary awe.

He did not seem to possess a great affinity for combat, as far as his Aspect went, but seemed like a personification of death despite that — simply due to his lethal skill, devious intelligence, and merciless killing intent.

With his three powerful Echoes and unfathomable awareness of every

peril facing the battle formation, the sinister Saint was in no way inferior to the most renowned champions of the Sword Domain.

The third war party was not the fastest, but it suffered the fewest casualties during the gruesome march.

The expedition force slowly conquered the Eastern First Rib, moving from one fissure to another and cutting off the sources of the scarlet infestation one by one.

By the time the great elevation of the Breastbone Reach drew near, a small team of the strongest Saints split off from the main force to escort Sky Tide of the White Feather clan to its slopes.

The Cloudveil parted, revealing the boundless white abyss beyond. Torrents of blinding light poured down, and the soldiers of the expedition force witnessed the unforgettable spectacle of the vast expanse of the Reach being devoured by flames in terrified silence.

They were far enough away from the breach in the clouds to be safe from the white abyss, but not far enough to be spared the fear of watching half of the world burn.

After that, the progress of the expedition force slowed down considerably, and grew much more perilous.

That was because Saint Tyris had finally exhausted her essence after protecting the soldiers for more than a week. Without the aegis of her power, nothing could save them from the merciless heavens anymore.

They suffered the first breach three days later, while scaling the slopes of the dead god's breastbone. It was a short one, only lasting a few hours, but many soldiers still lost their lives and became ash, their bodies scattered by the wind.

If there was one small consolation, it was that the abominable jungle and the vile creatures populating it burned with them.

The Cloudveil broke one more time before Saint Tyris regained her powers, to the same result.

The expedition force pushed south, slowly carving a path across the

vast expanse of the enormous breastbone.

The soldiers were tired. The sixteen hours of rest they received between having to go to battle were nowhere near enough for them to regain their vitality. The battles themselves were long and harrowing, reaping too many lives each time. The tide of Nightmare Creatures seemed endless, and the suffocating heat was hard to endure.

Worst of all, the geography of the Breastbone Reach prevented them from permanently cleansing its surface from the scarlet infestation — at least now that they were pursuing a different objective. Even if an extermination outpost was established around a fissure, the jungle would sooner or later spread to it from another direction.

Therefore, the expedition force moved south without leaving itself a path of retreat. A few days after they moved on, the infestation reclaimed the cleansed portions of the bone plain, enclosing the human army from all sides.

It would only be banished from these lands permanently if the Citadel in the Hollows was conquered, and the authority of the King of Swords spread to the Breastbone Reach.

Advancing forward was getting harder with each day…

And yet, after three weeks of the nightmarish marathon, the battered army finally reached its target.

In front of them, an enormous crack split the white surface of the ancient bone, and in the darkness below, unknown horrors awaited.

From here, the best warriors of the expedition force would attempt to brave the Hollows to reach and conquer the Citadel that lay in the dark depths.

Chapter-1881: Leaving the Camp

For the last few days of the dreadful march across the bones of the dead deity, Godgrave had been different from before. That was because the stormy clouds that always obscured the sky, suffused with blinding radiance, had finally given birth to an actual storm.

Strong winds assaulted the bone plain, and a torrential downpour fell like a flood. The scarlet jungle had turned maroon in the desaturated twilight, pressed down by the heavy rain.

The dark chasm of the great fissure was drinking the torrents of water like a hungry maw. Standing at its edge, fourteen Saints were looking down with somber expressions.

The expedition force had just claimed the area around the vast crack that split the plain. The soldiers were busy building a fortified encampment — this time, they would be remaining in one place for some time, besieged from all sides by the hungry jungle, so it had to resemble a fortress.

All Awakened warriors and Masters were remaining on the surface. So were Summer Knight and about half of the Transcendent champions that had participated in the expedition — their task was to defend the camp and make sure that the soldiers survived.

The fourteen Saints facing the fissure were those who would be venturing into the Hollows to conquer the Citadel.

Nephis and Sunny were among them. So were Saint Jest of Dagonet, Rivalen of Aegis Rose… and Roan of White Feather, as well. The rest were all exalted warriors that Sunny had come to know over the past few weeks.

Not too long ago, this many Transcendent champions would have been seen as a dire force capable of rivaling a Great Clan. Here in Godgrave, however, they were grim and uneasy, looking into the dark fissure with wary eyes.

Saint Jest suddenly let out a soft chuckle.

"I just know there's a good joke somewhere here. Let's see… there's a deep, dark crack in front of us, and we're supposed to enter it… entering, crack… damn, what can it be? It's on the tip of my tongue!"

The rest of the Saints stared at him with silent reproach. Eventually, a beautiful woman with auburn hair, the matriarch of one of Valor's vassal clans, said evenly:

"Please abstain from trying to joke, Sir Jest."

The older man glanced at her dully, then looked away with a dejected mumble.

"Really, now… you were much more fun as a little girl…"

The beautiful Saint did not respond, but her glare intensified.

After that, Rivalen of Aegis Rose broke the silence by addressing Sunny in his usual gallant manner:

"Lord Shadow, you know the Hollows better than any of us. What should we expect?"

The obnoxiously dashing man had not changed at all since the first day of the expedition. The rest of them looked ragged and worn-down, covered in sweat and soot — but he was clean and freshly shaven, with not a scratch on his resplendent golden armor. Even though his hair was messy and wet because of the rain, it somehow managed to look purposefully styled that way.

The relationship between him and Sunny had somewhat changed, though. Saint Rivalen was much more friendly and respectful toward the Lord of Shadows now, while Sunny couldn't really dislike the pompous Legacy anymore… for a very silly reason.

It was Rivalen's Transcendent form. When Sunny first saw it, he was a bit mesmerized. Shield Wall transformed into a towering beast with four stubby legs and hide so tough that it looked as if he was covered with plates of heavy armor. A single massive horn protruded from the beast's nose, longer than a ship's ram…

It was the legendary rhino!

As it turned out, Sunny had a soft spot for rhinos — for obvious reasons. He had never expected to see one in the flesh, but now that he did, disliking Saint Rivalen was harder than before.

He stared at the dashing man coldly.

The sight of his mask was quite unnerving, so Shield Wall's gallant smile grew a little forced.

Sunny sighed.

"...Imagine the surface of Godgrave, but ten times worse. The jungle never burns away, so it is much thicker. The Nightmare Creatures are older and more powerful. Fourteen of us are strong enough to handle Great abominations, but down there in the Hollows, there are Cursed beings as well. Those, we cannot provoke.

So, you will follow me quietly, and I will make sure that we don't wander into their hunting grounds."

Saint Rivalen nodded grimly.

At that moment, Roan took a step closer to the edge of the fissure, then turned and looked at Nephis with a smile.

"Then, Lady Nephis… shall we?"

With that, two powerful wings appeared behind him.

As the two Saints in the team who were capable of flight, Roan and Nephis were supposed to descend into the Hollows first — along with Sunny, who could turn into a crow.

Roan's Transformation had surprised Sunny, as well. He had always

assumed that the easygoing man would turn into a noble griffin, but in hindsight, there was no reason to think that.

The griffin Echo Roan used to ride on the Chained Isles, as it turned out, was a gift from his wife — it was not an ordinary Echo, either, but rather her Aspect Legacy. By now, the noble beast had reached Transcendence, and served as a protector of their daughter, Awakened Telle.

Saint Roan himself, meanwhile, could turn into a mighty winged lion. The giant creature was just as handsome as his human form was, with gorgeous white fur and enormous amber eyes.

And since Sunny had designed the [Belated Apology] with the purpose of being able to accommodate a Saint's Transformation, the giant lion's body was usually encased in intricate armor.

Saint Tyris and Roan must have been quite a sight, soaring high in the sky together…

Nephis summoned her own wings and nodded.

"Let's go."

With that, she jumped over the edge and plunged into the darkness.

Sunny and Roan followed, and soon, they saw the Great Hollows sprawling beneath them.

Chapter-1882: Entering the Hollows

The Hollows had undergone a striking transformation, looking very different from how they usually did.

There was still a vast and hollow expanse hidden inside the breastbone of the dead deity, drowning in darkness and overgrown with vermilion jungle. Monstrous trees and ferns towered like tall hills, the thick canopy of scarlet leaves fusing into a tumultuous red sea.

Great pillars of light were falling from the immense dome of white bone here and there, plunging some areas of the jungle into a dim twilight.

However, there was a rainstorm raging on the surface today. So, the light was not the only thing pouring through the cracks in the bone — grandiose waterfalls flowed down into the jungle, as well, plunging into the vermilion canopy as they connected the floor of the Hollow to its dome akin to foaming pillars.

The jungle seemed to have come alive, quenching its boundless thirst. However, there was more water than it could swallow — vast lakes and deep, raging rivers had formed throughout Hollows, turning them into a world of powerful currents.

Some of the furious rivers were wider and more abundant than most rivers in the Sword Domain.

In fact, when the Hollows were flooded, a network of them connected the interior of the titanic skeleton like a great waterway — if one dared to sail the currents, they could slip through the cracks in the walls of the breastbone, be carried by water down one of the ribs, and dive into the colossal sea that collected in the endless spine of

the dead god.

Luckily, that was not Sunny's goal today. He preferred to stay away from water on usual days, and he definitely did not want to have anything to do with the dark subterranean ocean resting in the gargantuan skeleton's spine.

Roan and Nephis were the first to reach ground. They landed on the shore of the deep lake that had formed below the fissure and dismissed their wings, preparing for battle. Sunny joined them a few moments later — assuming his human form, he commanded Serpent into the shape of an odachi and unleashed his shadow sense, scanning the chaotic world around him.

There were Nightmare Creatures nearby, hiding in the jungle. Some were drinking water, some were ravaging each other, some were brutally devouring struggling prey.

There were Nightmare Creatures in the water, as well. A few of them were already moving toward the surface, attracted by the smell of human souls.

He pointed to the lake.

"Get ready."

The three of them had already dealt with a score of reptilian horrors by the time the rest of the Saints arrived from above, using Memories to slow down their descent.

The strike force regrouped on the shore of the lake and prepared to move forward. Looking around, Saint Jest let out a heavy sigh.

"...And I thought that the humidity above was terrible. No, wait!"

His expression suddenly turned tense.

The rest of them looked at him with alarm.

"What is it, Sir Jest?"

The old man remained silent for a few moments, then said hesitantly:

"Entering, crack, humidity… bone… there had to be a joke here somewhere, right? Right?"

The same woman who had rebuked him earlier glowered.

"Sir Jest!"

The old man grinned.

"I bet Lord Shadow knows what I mean."

Sunny felt happy that his face was hidden behind a mask.

He was starting to understand how the old man had received his peculiar True Name.

'...I think I miss Effie.'

Suppressing the desire to shake his head, he turned south and took in the movements of the shadows in the surrounding jungle.

Initially, the expedition force had been meant to push all the way to the Third Rib, and enter the Hollows very close to the supposed location of the Citadel. However, Nephis had changed the plan to save time — now, they were much further north, near the Second Rib, which meant that the Saints had to cover a lot of distance to reach their goal.

It was not going to be easy.

Sunny was quite confident in the power of the Transcendent Team. He and Nephis alone were enough to deal with the Great abominations that dwelled in the Hollows, as long as they proceeded carefully. With a dozen Saints accompanying them, reaching the Citadel should not pose a problem.

The Cursed Nightmare Creatures, however, were entirely different.

Luckily, most of them were easy to avoid. With how far his shadow sense reached, Sunny could usually discover where the true horrors of Godgrave dwelled — mostly because Cursed abominations were so powerful that their mere existence exerted pressure on the world.

However, there was always an exception to the rule. More than that, he was worried that these dreadful beings would abandon their usual hunting grounds, lured by the presence of so many powerful human souls.

So, there was a choice to be made.

The strike team could move toward their goal with utmost speed by assuming their Transcendent forms, or they could take it slow and proceed forward as humans, spending several days to brave the jungle. Both options presented their own risks, and the final decision was entrusted to him, since he was supposed to be the guide.

Sunny hesitated.

He was tempted to go with the fastest approach because staying in the Hollows a minute longer than necessary was a gamble.

However… after three weeks of the never-ending battle, even the Saints were exhausted. Worse than that, they were all running low on essence, and not everyone was like him, who could sustain his Transcendent form indefinitely — or at least most of it, since keeping all of his incarnations manifested still consumed his essence.

Most Saints burned a considerable amount of it to maintain a Transformation, though. They weren't so drained that reaching the Citadel was impossible, but if they did go as fast as possible, everyone would be nearly spent by the time they reached it.

And Sunny had a feeling that slaying the guardian of the Gateway would demand more than a little effort, even from a team as powerful as this one.

So, going slowly and spending a few days restoring their reserves seemed like a more prudent decision.

'...Let's go with this plan, then.'

In any case, their advance could only be called slow when compared to the speed of their Transcendent forms. It was not like Saints actually lacked speed as humans.

Beckoning for the team to follow, Sunny chose a path and broke into a moderate sprint.

Soon, the lake on the shore disappeared behind the scarlet foliage, and the jungle enveloped them like a hungry veil.

Chapter-1883: In His Element

It took them four days to reach the designated area, which was a bit longer than Sunny had expected. His estimations had not accounted for the torrential flood that drowned the Hollows, turning the vast subterranean jungle into a darkly beautiful land of abundant rivers, deep lakes, and overgrown vermilion islands.

Great pillars of pale light poured from above here and there, illuminating the wet foliage and the glistening surface of flowing water.

The flooding had caused the entire ecosystem of the Hollows to come alive. Many weaker Nightmare Creatures were forced to flee their dens and lairs because of the flooding, migrating to elevated ground in search of safety — there were fearsome predators lurking in the water, having waited a long time for the chance to hunt and gorge themselves once again.

However, the migrating abominations were easy prey for the stronger horrors who ruled the highlands, and many ended up devoured anyway. The Hollows were always a cruel place, but for these last few days, they had become a scene of unimaginable carnage. Rivers of blood were being spilled under the shroud of scarlet leaves, and terrible wails resounded from the darkness without end.

The fourteen Saints made their way south. Sunny guided them through the jungle with utmost caution, but it was impossible to stay safe in this vibrant hell. Every now and then, they had to wet their blades with blood — the abominations that attacked them were powerful, fierce, numerous… and, worst of all, devilishly cunning.

They were all old predators who had survived the unforgiving cruelty of the world above, and then spent countless years fighting for the right to exist in the twilight below.

Still… the carriers of the Nightmare Spell were much more terrifying beasts.

None of the fourteen Saints was weak, and together, they were a force that even the dreadful dwellers of the Hollows had to be wary of. The conquest force killed countless Corrupted Nightmare Creatures and more than a few Great Ones, as well, moving south with constant speed.

As long as they did not encounter a Cursed abomination, the Saints were more than capable of contending with the perils of the ancient jungle.

It was not all bad, either.

Although the journey was full of peril and danger, the Transcendent champions were slowly restoring their reserves of essence. That was especially true for Sunny — the surface of Godgrave was eternally bathed in bright sunlight, but here in the Hollows, deep darkness reigned. Surrounded by shadows, he was in his source element, and could therefore absorb spirit essence from the air.

They did not sleep for the first three days, but then cleared a small ruin and camped there to rest and prepare themselves for the assault on the Citadel.

By then, the storm had passed, and the great waterfalls flowing into the Hollows from the surface had run dry. The air was humid and hazy, permeated by sweltering heat. The resting Saints had dismissed the outer layers of their armor, making Sunny feel quite a bit of envy.

He was regretful at the fact that Serpent wasn't a titan yet — otherwise, he could have given it a command to assume the form of the Winter Beast, and solved the heat problem once and for all.

At least Sunny was mature enough now not to get flustered at the sight of so many gorgeous people wearing the minimum amount of clothing needed to preserve the dignity of their flawless bodies.

…Or rather, there was only one body he was interested in here.

To his mild surprise, the mood among the Saints was not tense at all.

Instead, most were at ease, joking and laughing quietly as they shared food and water. A dire battle awaited them tomorrow, but these were the best warriors of the Sword Domain — they had braved harrowing Nightmares and the perils of the Dream Realm to attain Transcendence, so facing death was nothing new to them.

Sir Jest was in the middle of telling a story, gesturing with his cane to illustrate the most important points:

"When I contracted the Nightmare Spell, my mother thought that I was simply being lazy and didn't want to go to school — going to school was a big privilege back then, so needless to say, she was angry! That was how I ended up with a sore butt just before the First Nightmare. My mom might not have been an Awakened, but she really knew how to give a good beating…"

He chuckled with a wistful expression.

"Well, anyway, when I returned from the Nightmare and told people about battling demons in a magical world and possessing supernatural powers, they were very impressed. So impressed, in fact, that they sent me to a mental asylum… that's where I was when the Nightmare Creatures went on a rampage across the world.

Mind you, kids, nobody even knew what Nightmare Creatures were back then, let alone how to kill one. In fact, we weren't calling them Nightmare Creatures yet — instead, people still called them "the infected" out of habit…"

The beautiful Saint who had been the least tolerant of the old man's jokes — Saint Helie — was looking at him with a hint of admiration.

"Uncle Jest… wait. But shouldn't the Nightmare Creatures have appeared before the first Sleepers? How come nobody believed you?"

Her question was innocent enough, but it prompted Sir Rivalen to ask another.

"And there should have been millions of people inexplicably falling asleep back then. Why would your mother think that you were simply being lazy?"

Roan added with a smile:

"Didn't they send you to a mental asylum long before you became a Sleeper, though? That is what you told the last time..."

Saint Jest looked at them in outrage.

"What do you even know, brats?! Stop ruining my story!"

Sunny smiled behind the mask.

He would have loved to stay and listen to the stories about the First Generation — no matter how unreliable the narrator was — but he had to concentrate on scouting the path to the Citadel.

So, he left the Saints to rest and wandered outside, sending two of his shadows south.

Unlike the other members of the conquest force, he was tense.

Both because the creature guarding the Citadel was truly terrifying, and because of another reason.

'I've made a mistake.'

Back when Mordret invaded the Sword Domain, Sunny had been too hasty. He answered Cassie's call and arrived at the main camp of the Sword Army not knowing that his orders would change — instead of raiding Song's supply lines, he was here in the Hollows, preparing to help Anvil expand his Domain.

The problem was that the Lord of Shadows was here in all his glory — all four shadows that comprised this persona of his were here present.

Which meant that there was none left in the Nameless Temple.

Seishan and Death Singer were currently in the process of conquering a Citadel of their own, far west. Beastmaster was protecting the stronghold of the Song Army and slowly cleansing the western reach of the Collarbone Plain.

Lightslayer had never shown herself after the war council, so he had no idea where she was.

The Queen of Worms was aware that the Lord of Shadows had allied himself to Valor. It wasn't hard to deduce that he would be used to disrupt their supply lines… was Revel leading a small force of elite warriors to repel the supposed raid party?

Or had she planned to assault the Nameless Temple itself?

If so…

It could be troublesome.

Sunny's Citadel was not defenseless, even if he wasn't there personally. Nightmare was protecting it. More importantly, it had the Guardian — the invisible being that no mere Saint could sense, let alone destroy.

And Sunny himself was much closer to the southern edge of the Breastbone Reach now than he had been before. He could return to the Nameless Temple relatively quickly, if need be. Better yet, he could travel to the waking world and step back into the great hall of the Nameless Temple in mere minutes.

But still, still…

Sunny was uneasy.

'I'll send a shadow back right after we conquer the Citadel. Just in case.'

Losing the Nameless Temple was not an option, so he had to be careful.

Frowning behind the mask, he turned his gaze south.

Tomorrow, they would face the guardian of the old ruin and challenge it in a battle...

And after that, the nature of the war in Godgrave would irrevocably change.

Chapter-1884: Scarlet Garden

They set out in the morning — which wasn't any different from the day in Godgrave. The jungle, which had been teeming with Nightmare Creatures before, gradually became quiet and eerily empty as they moved further south, making the Saints tense with its sudden tranquillity.

Even the plants, which were as predatory as the beasts in the scarlet jungle, remained still.

That was because the conquest force was entering the land which belonged to the master of the old ruin… the creature they were meant to defeat.

As they moved, Saint Jest happened to catch up with Sunny, who was leading the party. The old man was using his cane to swat away branches and vines, looking annoyed because of the heat and humidity.

"That guardian we're supposed to kill… what kind of creature was it again?"

Sunny turned his head briefly, giving Saint Jest an impassive look.

"I do not know. Although I explored the Hollows casually, I never failed to avoid getting too close to this place. All I can say is that the guardian of the Citadel is a Great Nightmare Creature of a higher Class… a Terror, perhaps. Maybe even a Titan."

The old man chewed his lips.

"A Great Terror, really? Gods, the world is changing… it used to be that the existence of such beings was merely a theory. In fact, I remember mocking a bunch of academics viciously for suggesting that something this unreasonable exists! And here I am, on my way to

battle one. Who's the fool now, huh?"

Sunny smiled behind the mask.

"I'd say that we are all fools, for choosing to face such a creature voluntarily."

He paused for a moment, then added in his usual cold tone:

"Still, what's wrong with being a fool?"

Saint Jest gave him a surprised look, then laughed.

"Exactly! I couldn't have put it better myself. What a poignant sentiment… now, we just need to work on your delivery…"

Soon enough, the canopy of the jungle parted, and they found themselves on the shore of a vast lake. Dozens of rivers joined to form it, and even though the storm had already passed, the lake was still full and deep.

At the center of the lake, a tall structure rose from the water. It looked both like a beautiful temple and a grand castle... however, that castle was unlike any other that Sunny had seen.

Its walls were made out of pale wood instead of stone — not out of boards or logs, though. Instead, it was as if countless white trees had grown and fused into a seamless whole to form the shape of a towering structure. The entirety of it was one great keep that resembled a pagoda, with layers of tiled roofs, deep eaves, and triangular gables.

The crimson tiles of the sloped roofs were worn and faded, but they must have been vividly scarlet once, just like the canopy of the jungle. The white temple was overgrown with vermilion moss, with vines and tree branches protruding from the gaping holes in its broken roofs and empty windows. As such, it almost looked like a vertical garden that rested in the middle of the lake.

Sunny studied it with unease, but also with a sense of curiosity.

He wondered what purpose that beautiful structure had served once,

before the civilization that thrived in the Hollows once was destroyed.

Was it a sacred place where people came to worship? A stronghold to protect them from the perils of the shattered world? A logistical hub where the ships sailing to the far reaches of the Hollows came to trade?

Considering how many rivers connected to the lake, the latter would make sense. Or maybe all three of his theories were true, and the garden temple served many purposes while it was tended to by the ancient people.

In any case…

Sunny was pretty sure that Godgrave had been a part of Sun God's realm once. As such, the civilization of the Hollows would have been infected by the Nightmare Spell, and destroyed as a consequence — just like the civilization of the Twilight Sea.

He had witnessed some of what these people had been capable of in the ruins of Condemnation. Although they had not possessed the technology and war machines of the waking world, the War God's realm, they were in many ways no less advanced than them… even superior in some regards, judging by the ingenious sorcery used to create the asuras.

Such a civilization had fallen, and now, Nightmare Creatures ruled over its ruins.

Whatever sacredness the garden castle had once contained was gone, replaced by vile corruption. And the abomination whose lair it had become would be a terrible one, without a doubt.

Sunny sighed and extended his shadow sense forward. Something was hiding there, behind the pale wooden walls… he could feel the eerie threat of it, but not much else.

'...Damnation.'

He would have really preferred if it hadn't rained, and they could reach the Citadel by walking. He was tired of diving into perilous

lakes.

"There's no point in wasting time. Let's go."

The Saints prepared for battle. Before too long, Saint Roan assumed his Transcendent Form — a beautiful lion with white fur and amber eyes suddenly appeared on the shore of the lake, the vital spots on his mighty body protected in an intricate armor. Turning his enormous head, the giant beast lowered one wing and allowed the rest of them to climb onto his wide back.

The only exceptions were Nephis, who summoned her wings, and Sunny, who turned into a crow.

The white lion let out a low, reverberating growl and pushed himself off the ground. A small hurricane was stirred by his wings, and he soared into the air, flying above the dark waters of the lake in the direction of the Citadel.

Sunny and Nephis followed.

…To his surprise, they reached the distant temple safely. The lake remained still, as if there were no swarms of dreadful abominations hiding in its depths. In fact, Sunny could not sense any movement in the water at all.

And yet, he could swear that it smelled faintly of blood. It almost felt like someone was watching him, as well.

They landed on the steps that led to the gates of the ruined Citadel. The Saints jumped to the ground, and Roan dismissed his Transformation.

Nephis took the lead and ventured forward with tense caution, holding her sword at the ready.

No one spoke, afraid to inform the enemy of their arrival.

They had just passed the gate and entered the echoing interior of the garden temple when Sunny finally sensed it…

Not a shadow, but a movement of all the shadows, as if a source of

light was barreling toward them with terrible speed.

...Then, there was a flash, and an arrow that seemed to be woven of moonlight brushed past Nephis, piercing the chest of one of the Saints.

Chapter-1885: Fortune Favors the Bold

The arrow was aimed at Neph's head, but despite how fast it flew, she still managed to dodge it. The arrowhead left a long cut on her cheek, then pierced the chest of a Saint who stood behind her.

'Shot from elevation.'

That was the first thought that crossed Sunny's mind, who had subconsciously traced the arrow's trajectory.

Then, for a few moments, everything moved too fast for him to think.

The wounded Saint let out a stifled yelp and started to fall, blood splattering on the wooden floor. His armor should have been robust enough to if not deflect, then at least dissipate the force of the arrow, so that it did not pierce too deeply.

However, somehow, the moonlight arrow seemed to ignore the durability of the enchanted metal and the resilience of Transcendent flesh, killing him on the spot.

Just like that, a Saint died.

"Ambush!"

Before anyone else could react, Sunny called upon the shadows and summoned an impenetrable wall in front of them. Almost instantly, two more ethereal arrows struck it, the impacts producing thunderous bangs. That wall of shadows quaked and cracked.

Nephis was already moving.

Strangely enough, she wasn't lunging into the darkness to shorten the

distance between her and the hidden archer. Instead, she was spinning around, searching for something beyond the gates of the castle.

The thin cut on her cheek was yet to fill with blood, glowing softly with ethereal, pale light.

"Shield Wall!"

Her sword was pointing to the outside.

A split second after Sunny's wall materialized, Sir Rivalen had already answered her call. The air behind them shimmered, and an invisible force field manifested itself in the gateway of the Citadel. Its faint contours resembled a grid of ghostly, interlocked shields…

But before the shields closed, two more arrows — these ones made out of wood and steel, not moonlight — slid into the swiftly narrowing gaps, striking two more Saints in the back.

One struck the thin gap between the edge of a man's breastplate and his helmet, piercing his neck. The other hit the crack between the front half of a cuirass and the back half, slithering its way through the victim's ribs.

The level of accuracy needed to perform such shots was unimaginable.

The first Saint was killed instantly, but the second survived despite the heavy injury. Still, he was temporarily rendered powerless — unless a potent healer spent time treating his wound, he would not be participating in the battle.

Finally, the two bodies fell to the floor. The moonlight arrow dimmed and dissolved into nothingness, leaving a haunting afterglow in its wake. The cut on Neph's cheek swelled with blood… the conquest team, reduced to twelve members in an instant, was now protected from all sides by the barrier of shadows and Saint Rivalen's invisible aegis.

For a moment, nothing happened.

They possessed a devastating amount of power, but surrounded and not knowing where to aim it, the champions of the Sword Domain found themselves in an awkward position.

Sunny was holding the serpentine odachi, ready to act. Nephis was standing still, a deep scowl on her face… there was something off about her, but he could not immediately tell what.

Saint Helie, the stern woman who had chastised Jest of Dagonet for his jokes, had nocked an arrow on the string of her bow. The old man himself had twisted the handle of his cane, revealing it to be a hidden sword. Golden arcs of electricity were dancing around Roan's ironclad figure, illuminating his handsome, somber face.

Rivalen of Aegis Rose was kneeling near the wounded Saint, protecting the man with his shield.

'...Why can't I sense anything?'

Sunny felt grim apprehension at his failure to detect the enemies in advance. By now, it was clear that what had attacked them was no Nightmare Creature…

No. They were humans.

Transcendent champions of Song.

His eyes widened slightly, and a crooked smile twisted his lips behind the mask.

'How daring…'

Everyone expected the leaders of the Song Army, which had been losing the war at first, to concentrate all their forces on conquering the Citadel on the western edge of the dead god's collarbone — after all, it was quite close to their camp.

And they had. However, it seemed that they had gone after the Citadel in the northern reach of the titanic skeleton's breastbone as well, sending a small team to infiltrate it in secret and ambush the Sword Army's conquest force.

A bold strategy, especially considering how hard it would have been for a handful of Saints to reach this far into the Hollows without the support of an army.

But…

Did they really hope to survive a battle against Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan and the Lord of Shadows?

Boldness did not always pay off.

Sunny would have expected Nephis to heal the wounded Saint, but instead, she raised her sword and said evenly:

"Reveal yourself."

For a moment, he was stunned by the childishness of her demand. Why would the enemy laying in the ambush reveal their well-hidden position and give up the advantage?

He would certainly never respond to her call.

However… perhaps, he did not understand something about the world.

Because in the next moment, he finally sensed the shadows moving again as something massive flew at them from the darkness of the ancient temple.

An enormous creature soared above the wooden floor and then plummeted down, crashing into the wall of shadows with a deafening boom. The barrier finally crumbled, and Sunny saw the shape of the dead thing as it sprawled motionlessly on the floor.

It was a towering, vaguely humanoid abomination wrapped in a billowing dark robe. Elements of intricate silver armor covered its long arms and slender torso, and six pairs of beautiful grey wings extended from its back, laying on the floor in a broken, bloodied mess.

It must have been great and harrowing once. But now…

It was dead.

The winged giant had not leaped at the barrier of shadows. It was simply tossed at it by someone's powerful hand, discarded like a sack of dead flesh.

Sunny's expression darkened.

'This… is the guardian of the Citadel.'

There were no moonlight arrows flying at them from somewhere above. Instead, there was the sound of steps.

Then, a slender silhouette walked out of the darkness, piercing the twelve Saints with a cold and arrogant look.

She was a breathtaking woman with raven-black hair and eyes that seemed to be cut from pure obsidian. Her slender body was encased in a suit of dark leather armor, and she wielded a curved sword akin to a tachi, its pommel wrapped in a black silk cord.

With her alabaster skin, exquisite beauty, and cold expression, she was undeniably stunning… but, more than that, her presence was vast and oppressive, like the lightless expanse of a boundless, dark ocean.

The woman met Neph's gaze and spoke loudly:

"I am Revel, the Lightslayer."

Then, her alluring lips twisted slightly into a semblance of a dark, joyless smile.

She pointed her sword forward and said, her voice full of aloof coldness:

"...Welcome to the Song Domain."

And as the words left her mouth, the corpse of the Great Terror suddenly stirred.

The bodies of the two slain Saints stirred, as well, reaching toward

their former comrades with murderous, dead hands.

Chapter-1886: Dark Dancer

'Damn it.'

Lightslayer had already taken the Citadel…

And, therefore, Ki Song's Domain had already descended on Godgrave.

There were a couple more conclusions Sunny made in the split moment before Revel's words resounded in the darkness of the ancient castle and the corpses came alive, but there was not much time to contemplate.

Since Revel was here, then the first arrow must have been shot by Moonveil. The two from behind… had to be Silent Stalker.

Who else was here?

Three Saints, no matter whether they were the Queen's daughters, were not enough to take on the conquest force of the Sword Army… even with the element of surprise on their side. Unless Ki Song was here personally, he struggled to understand what their plan was.

And she couldn't be here in person — for the simple reason that only two of the fourteen Saints had died, not all of them.

The corpses of the two slain champions came alive, lunging at their former comrades. They did not accomplish much, though — as soon as they had stirred, Neph's sword beheaded one, while the other was gruesomely dismembered by Saint Jest's cane sword. It happened in a heartbeat, so swift that Sunny did not even notice the thin blade move.

The corpse of the Great Terror was blasted back by a blinding bolt of lightning that Roan seemed to have sent flying from his sword. The

creature was delayed, but not destroyed.

The rest of the Sword Saints all exploded with motion, dispersing as they summoned the power of their Aspects or assumed their Transcendent forms.

Suddenly, the area in front of the castle gates felt very overcrowded.

Sunny noticed Saint Rivalen, in his heavily armored rhino form, ramming into the wooden gates of the ancient stronghold and barreling straight through them, on his way to challenge Silent Stalker.

Saint Helie's Transcendent form was that of a towering, graceful centaur — pushing herself into a leap with four hooves, she simultaneously let an arrow loose.

He did not waste much time watching, though.

His target was Revel.

Before Helie's arrow could strike, Sunny already stepped through the shadows while lashing out with his odachi. There was a heavy feeling in his chest — if his last conclusion was correct, then this would be his only chance to end the battle easily.

Sadly, Lightslayer was too swift, and too skilled. Dancing away with an easy step, she deflected his blow with her sharp do despite the sudden and unpredictable nature of his attack. She also dodged Helie's arrow with the same motion.

"The Lord of Shadows, I presume..."

Her husky voice remained calm.

Sunny cursed inwardly.

In the next moment, a deafening howl seemed to shatter the world, and a bestial silhouette leaped from somewhere above, landing between the Saints of the Sword Domain.

A light smile twisted Revel's lips.

"...You're mine."

With that...

A tide of pure darkness suddenly drowned everything around them — true, elemental darkness. It suffocated Sunny's shadow sense, turned him blind, and at the same time cut him off from his source element.

A split second later, he felt space itself become twisted around him, and suddenly, the clangor of battle grew distant. It was as if he was transported somewhere else in the castle, separating him from the rest of the conquest force.

He didn't know whether that was some Memory Revel used, a power of another Song Saint, or a Component of the lake Citadel. However, he knew that wherever he was, there was someone else there with him.

'True darkness…'

True darkness was the natural enemy of shadows. With how unique and varied Aspects were, Sunny knew that he would run into an Awakened with affinity to it sooner or later. He also guessed what was happening after failing to sense the ambush and see Revel until she stepped in front of the Saints of the Sword Domain.

Why did it have to be one of Ki Song's daughters, of all people? What did darkness even have to do with the lineage of Beast God, which the princesses of Song all seemed to share despite not being related to the Queen by blood?

Luckily… he wasn't defenseless against elemental darkness, either.

Sunny released his odachi and let it fall to the ground. Before it did, Serpent abandoned the Soul Weapon form and turned into a Nightmare Creature that resembled an enormous firefly — one of the Corrupted abominations Sunny had killed a long time ago, in the Burned Forest.

Darkness might have been the natural enemy of shadows, but it feared light.

Serpent's body ignited with brilliant radiance, chasing the darkness away — instantly, Sunny could see that he was standing in the middle of a vast, overgrown hall. Roots and scarlet vines grew through the cracked walls, the bulging floor, and the broken ceiling, making it seem like the thick of the jungle.

Lightslayer was standing a few meters away, looking at him with the same aloof expression.

Her darkness had retreated, but it was not vanquished — instead, it flowed around them like a dark cloud, suffocating the light produced by Serpent. For now, there seemed to be a fragile balance between the two elements, with neither being able to destroy the other.

Sunny smiled behind his mask as Saint and Fiend rose from his shadows.

"You didn't really think that would work, did you?"

Revel studied Saint for a few moments, then nodded.

"No. I didn't."

With that, two figures suddenly stepped out from behind her.

Sunny's heart grew cold.

Standing on both sides of Revel, the Lightslayer — the first of Ki Song's daughters to reach Transcendence — were…

Two perfect copies of her.

They were both beautiful, clad in dark leather armor, with raven-black hair and obsidian eyes… dark, cold, and breathtaking.

Suddenly, there were three of Revel in front of him… or one Revel and her two incarnations.

It was as if Sunny was looking at his own reflection.

His eyes widened slightly.

'Reflection…'

In the next moment, the Reflections unleashed two tides of darkness of their own, and suddenly, the light was overpowered…

***

On the stone steps outside the ancient Citadel, several Saints were battling the elusive Silent Stalker.

Beyond the gates, the rest of them were entangled in a ferocious fight against three bestial monsters. One of them was Lonesome Howl, another of Ki Song's daughters. The other two were Mordret's Reflections. The corpse of the dead Great Terror was also there — damaged, but unrelenting.

Deeper in the hall, Saint Jest of Dagonet was facing a towering gargoyle. The creature's noble face, which seemed to be carved from grey stone, bore a distant and somber expression.

The old man grinned.

"The Saint of Sorrow, huh?"

The gargoyle lowered its head slightly.

Saint Jest shook his head dejectedly.

"Goodness… that girl Ravensong just had to send the dullest man in the world to fight against me. How mean…"

And somewhere else, on the highest floor of the majestic castle…

Nephis was surrounded by three delicate young women. Each of them had enchanting features, white hair, and beautiful eyes that seemed to glimmer with the afterglow of pale moonlight.

Neph's cheek was still cut, the left side of her face painted with blood.

She touched the cut briefly and looked at her fingers, frowning at the sight of blood.

"...Are you Princess Moonveil?"

All three of the young women smiled.

However, only one spoke:

"Indeed. However…"

The pale radiance of her eyes slowly dimmed, turning them into two gaping windows into an abyssal, lightless void.

Suddenly, the hall seemed colder, darker, and full of echoing emptiness.

"I am also called the Black Moon. That name, I think, suits me better."

Nephis looked at her fingers again.

There was no radiance beneath her skin. The blade of her sword remained dull, devoid of incandescent light.

…Her wound wasn't healing.

Chapter-1887: Never Before

A terrible battle was raging on the grounds of the mystical castle, making the Citadel groan and quake. Its ancient walls were cracking, and crimson tiles were raining from the sloped roofs, falling into the surging waters of the deep lake.

The dim twilight of the Hollows was torn apart by flashes of blinding light.

On the edge of the foaming water, a taciturn woman in a black hunting attire was calmly drawing her bow as an enormous rhino was barrelling at her down the stone stairs, shattering the weathered steps into dust as he charged.

Unshaken, the woman silently released the wet string. It shot forward, leaving a string-shaped cloud of water droplets behind — the twisting arrow pierced the humid air and unerringly struck the rhino's right eye just moments before the giant beast rammed its horn through her chest.

The beast was cunning, though. It shut one of his eyes just before the arrow hit — the arrowhead spent most of its destructive force to penetrate the heavy eyelid, damaging the rhino's eye, but failing to kill him on the spot.

His furious bellow shook the world as blood flowed down its snout.

However, before the rhino could impale the huntress on his horn, she finally moved.

In the next moment, a giant black panther leaped on the charging giant, tore the tough hide on his neck and back with her claws, and soared into the air.

Landing on the wall of the castle, the panther ran up its surface, then

spun and pushed herself into another jump in a blink of an eye. Splinters of wood flew in all directions, and a black blur shot toward the ground, where two more Saints had just emerged from the broken gates…

A powerful tremor shook the entire Citadel, and a devastating shockwave rolled from the darkness inside, pulverizing the debris of the gates into fine dust.

The clash between Shield Wall and Silent Stalker would have been a harrowing sight for many — after all, it wasn't often that two Saints fought each other… or at least it had not been before the Domain War.

But today, it was just a minor spectacle happening on the fringes of the true battle.

Inside the castle, a hell that humanity had never witnessed before was blossoming in all its dreadful, murderous glory.

Seven Transcendent champions of the Sword Domain had clashed with Lonesome Howl of the Song Clan and the Saint of Sorrow, aided by two Reflections sent by Mordret, the Prince of Nothing. This many human Transcendents had never fought before.

The violent forces released by the clash of the Saints had wrecked the interior of the ancient Citadel, turning it into a scene of utter destruction — it might have withstood the fall of the civilization that had built it, the ruthless reality of the Hollows, and thousands of years of desolation, but it was slowly coming undone under the obliterating carnage of the bloody battle.

The wooden walls were cracking. The floor was on the verge of collapsing. The ceiling of the grand hall was crumbling, supported only by the vines and the roots of the trees that had permeated the sacred castle over the countless years.

Lonesome Howl's Transcendent form was that of a giant, monstrous wolf. Her fur was black like the night sky, and her bestial eyes were burning with frenzied red flame. Terrifying fangs were glistening in her enormous maw, each taller than an adult man.

They were already painted scarlet by fresh blood.

The princess of Song herself had clashed with a noble lion, the two of them entangled into a devastating hurricane of white and black. Bolts of lightning were dancing in the air, and steaming blood was spilling on the shattered floor, flowing into the bowels of the ancient Citadel.

The two Reflections had assumed the forms of terrifying black wolves, as well. Only… unlike Lonesome Howl, who was a Transcendent Beast, both of them were Supreme ones.

They lacked the will and ingenuity of humans, but were much stronger. More than that, both of them possessed the divine lineage of Beast God, just like the princess of Song did, and therefore, the Saints of Swords could not overpower the Reflections despite their numerical advantage.

And worst of all…

The corpse of the Great Terror slain by the Song sisters was moving, as well, risen by malevolent will, indifferent to pain, and nearly indestructible.

The bodies of two Saints that had been killed in the ambush were moving too. The one dismembered by Jest of Dagonet was struggling weakly on the ground, unable to rise… the one beheaded by Changing Star's sword, however, stood up slowly, blood flowing down his chest from his severed neck. A moment later, he lunged at the nearest human, sinking his fingers into their flesh.

Startled and momentarily immobilized, the grabbed Saint activated one of his Aspect Abilities to sever the dead man's arms. However, he did not receive a chance to — because of the delay, he failed to evade in time, and the paw of a frenzied wolf crashed into him, ripping open his armor, chest, and throat.

The bloodied corpse fell to the ground…

...A few moments later, though, it moved, slowly rising back up.

Saint Jest observed the harrowing scene with a wry expression.

Turning back to the towering gargoyle he had been fighting, the old man smiled.

"How vexing. Not only is my Aspect useless against you, but you are even protecting the she-wolf pup against me. And that stone body of yours refuses to be cut. Ha! If that is not irony, then I don't know what is…"

Then, his smile slowly turned dark, sinister, and eerily chilling.

"But you know, Sorrow's son…"

Something moved beneath Jest's clothes, and his form suddenly started to change, ripping them apart.

His voice had changed, as well, growing deep and inhuman:

"The funny thing is, that only makes me want to cut you open more…"

There was a deafening crash somewhere above them, and the Citadel shook once again — this time much more violently than before. A section of its outer walls collapsed, revealing the interior of several overgrown floors.

A tide of darkness spilled from one of them, followed by two falling figures.

Chapter-1888: A Neat Trick

Sunny was troubled.

Not only because he was facing Revel the Lightslayer and two Reflections, separated from the rest of the group and having no clue how Nephis was doing, but also because the familiar voice in his head was silent.

[Cassie?]

There was no answer.

Either the Song sisters had a way to isolate those who entered the Citadel from the outside world — be it because of the Citadel itself, a mysterious facet of the Queen's Domain, or some other means — or something else was happening on the surface, not allowing Cassie to split her attention.

In any case, at that moment, Sunny realized that he had grown both accustomed and reliant on having the blind seer be his invisible companion.

Her silence made him feel uneasy.

But there was no time to dwell on that…

Because Revel was already attacking.

The true darkness summoned by her and the two Reflections had overpowered the light emanating from Serpent, drowning the overgrown hall once again. The giant firefly's body grew dim and bleak, its radiance snuffed out. Even the infernal glow of Fiend's fire was extinguished.

Sunny was blind once again… he just barely managed to manifest a

sword from the shadows before they were consumed by the darkness.

He took a step back and moved his odachi. In the next moment, a violent impact reverberated through his bones, and he felt a sharp blade being blocked by his own. Twisting it into a bind, Sunny calmly shifted his weight and delivered a crushing forward kick — there was the sound of soft soles scraping against wood, as if someone had leaped back, and his kick struck nothing but air.

Almost at the same time, he heard an irritated growl, and a long jet of red flame momentarily pushed the darkness away, revealing the silhouettes of the fighters.

Saint had moved to protect Serpent from the deadly attack launched by one of the Reflections — just as the hall became briefly enveloped in a dim red glow, a sharp do sword landed on her shield, sending a powerful shockwave rolling outward and tearing the ancient roots apart.

Fiend had been weakened by true darkness, as well — the jet of flame he spat failed to catch the second Reflection, and it leaped into the air, delivering a flying kick to his wide chest. Another shockwave cracked the floor, and the steel giant staggered back.

Both Reflections looked like the darkly beautiful Princess Revel.

But Revel herself was standing in front of Sunny, just a few meters away.

As both of them ignored the shockwaves and the light of Fiend's flame died out, her cold voice resounded in the darkness:

"...Neat trick."

She sounded both impressed by and indifferent to the fact that he had managed to deflect her first attack despite being blinded by the darkness.

A moment later, her voice drowned in the deafening cacophony of his Shadows battling Mordret's Reflections.

'Crap…'

Sunny shifted his stance and defended his side. There was another impact, and although he prevented Revel's blade from biting into his armor, its tip still scraped against the Onyx Mantle, pushing him back and almost throwing him off balance.

The reason Sunny was able to defend himself against the Lightslayer was simple — it was a combination of his experience and Shadow Dance, as well as the threefold augmentation of his shadows. He might not have had the time to glean the true essence of her battle style, but he knew enough to predict where she would attack from, and how.

…More or less. She was too swift and powerful to be a mere Saint, which meant that her Aspect was granting her some kind of augmentation of her own.

Still, Revel's sword was very similar to a tachi, and Sunny knew how to wield one very well. Her Aspect, meanwhile, seemed to allow her impossible freedom of movement within the darkness — a trait reminiscent of the Black Knight of the ruined cathedral, whom Sunny had killed many years ago… as well as his own Shadow Step, in a way.

In fact, Sunny and Revel even looked somewhat alike. It was not that their features were that similar — there were plenty of pale people with raven hair and dark eyes in the world. It was just that they shared a certain bleak style.

After all, shadows could easily be mistaken for true darkness, and vice versa.

That was why Sunny could tell how she would try to kill him, to a degree. He simply defended against what he himself would do.

It had worked until now…

But how much longer would it preserve his life?

Without shadow sense, he could not peer into Revel's intentions with Shadow Dance. Without sight, he couldn't see what she was doing. She could betray his expectations and deliver a subpar attack just to

throw off his predictions. She could gain an edge over him by simply being patient.

She could even neglect him entirely and move to dispatch one of his Shadows from behind first.

'Damn it!'

Sunny had not felt so powerless in a long, long time.

The Citadel groaned and quaked around them. He clashed with Lightslayer a few more times, barely managing to avoid death in the barrage of insidious, lethal attacks. Her swordsmanship was stellar, and her mastery of combat was fearsome.

He blocked or deflected some blows and weakened the impact of the rest — Revel's sword rattled his body and left scars on the surface of the Onyx Mantle, but his armor held.

The sharp blade did slide into its cracks a couple of times, causing him torturous pain, but dealing little damage.

'That's… one vile enchantment…'

Revel's sword seemed to infect everything it touched with a plague of potent poisons, causing unbearable pain, paralysis, wasting, and necrosis all at the same time.

Blood Weave devoured them hungrily, preventing any of the poisons from spreading to his heart.

A cold scoff came from the darkness.

"...Are you even human? I can't smell your blood at all."

Sunny smiled crookedly behind his mask.

"Human? No… I am just a shadow. Shadows don't really bleed."

Despite his smile, he was grim. Surviving Revel's onslaught was useless — the initiative was fully on her side, and his Shadows were being tied down by Mordret's Reflections. At least one of them had to

be Supreme, it seemed… otherwise, Saint would have destroyed her enemy already.

If this went on, he was going to lose.

And then, he would die.

Well, not really. At least one of his shadows would be destroyed, leaving Sunny weakened and an incarnation short.

But he would most likely survive.

Even if all four of the shadows were killed, Sunny's soul would not collapse — after all, it was fortified by Soul Weave. A normal human's soul would crumble and dissipate if its integrity was violated too severely, but he was different. As long as at least a shred of Sunny's soul remained, it would be able to one day restore itself.

However…

What about the rest of the Saints of the conquest force? What about Roan?

…What about Nephis?

He needed to think of something. A tactical shift… a new strategy.

Sunny gritted his teeth.

Then... he gave his Shadows a mental command.

A moment later, Fiend turned around, rushed blindly at the wall of the overgrown hall, and collided with it at terrible speed.

The great weight of the towering devil and his Supreme power caused the entire Citadel to quake. An entire section of the castle's wall collapsed, and Fiend — as well as the Reflection pursuing him — tumbled outside, falling into the distant lake.

In the chaos, Serpent scurried toward Saint and leaped into the air, turning into a serpentine odachi. Saint dismissed her dark blade and grasped the hilt of the odachi with an unshaken fist.

And Sunny…

Sunny released the hold on his avatar, allowing the Lord of Shadows to turn into one.

The true darkness consumed the wild shadows, but it could not consume Sunny's own — just like he could not command or manifest the shadows of living beings.

If his true body was here, he would not have been able to assume an intangible form, since there were no shadows for him to dive into. But the Lord of Shadows was a manifested avatar — therefore, his natural form was that of a shadow, to begin with.

So, Sunny was able to abandon the physical form without losing control of the incarnation. He had become a shadow in the depths of a sea of darkness.

For a moment, there were four shadows — haughty and his three companions — drowning in that sea. It felt eerie and unpleasant, as though something was gnawing at Sunny's very soul.

However, he could still control the avatar.

So, he did something that he had never tried before.

Followed by the other three shadows, he crawled across the floor in the direction where Saint was fighting against the Reflection…

And wrapped himself around her body, fusing with it like any other of his shadows would.

Chapter-1889: Heart of Stone

True darkness was Sunny's natural enemy.

However, to Saint, it was a weapon.

Because she had been born in the Underworld, where darkness reigned.

[Heart of Darkness] Attribute Description: "A vestige of an ancient darkness dwells in this Shadow's heart, granting her tenebrous powers."

[Mantle of Darkness] Ability Description: "Darkness embraces this Shadow. When surrounded by darkness, and true darkness more so, her swiftness and might will increase. Her wounds will be healed, and her heart will grow fuller."

[Blade of Darkness] Ability Description: "The true darkness dwelling in this Shadow's heart can be summoned in the form of a fearsome weapon, as long as the Shadow has mastered the use of that weapon. The Blade of Darkness can slay those of flesh and those of spirit; it never dulls, never falters, and never breaks. Alternatively, the darkness can be summoned to augment a mundane weapon."

…When Revel summoned the tide of elemental darkness, Sunny's powers were suppressed. Fiend and Serpent were weakened, as well.

But Saint only grew stronger.

There were not one, but three sources of true darkness around the graceful stone knight — the Lightslayer and two Reflections who had mirrored her Aspect. Therefore, Saint's heart was overflowing with power. Her body was nourished by the darkness, growing stronger, faster, and more enduring.

Most importantly of all, she wasn't blinded by the darkness — instead, her perception had only become sharper.

That was why Sunny had abandoned his usual ways. In most battles, he himself played the role of the main blade of the Shadow Cohort — while the Shadows supported him, it was his task to deliver the fatal blow.

But in the sea of elemental darkness, Saint was the best and only option. The rest of them were not only an inferior choice, but also a liability… so, Sunny had chosen to remove himself from the battle, betting everything on Saint.

The taciturn knight was already empowered by the darkness. Now, three of his shadows had bestowed their blessings upon her.

And, lastly, Sunny did something that he had never done before — turning into a shadow, he wrapped himself around her stonelike body, hoping to add the fourth blessing to the other three.

Surprisingly, it worked.

Sunny felt himself… fusing with Saint, like his shadows had done in the past. It was a strange and indescribable feeling — not unpleasant, though. Rather, it felt natural and even a little euphoric, as if he was doing something that he had always been meant to do.

Not that he could have, before becoming a Saint. Even now, Sunny did not know if something like that would have been possible if he attempted the fusion with his original body instead of a shadow incarnation.

Suddenly, he found himself split between two conscious states. One of them was that of himself — he was aware of his existence and identity, and although he could not quite sense the bounds of his intangible form, he knew that it was there. If he wished, he could move away from Saint, regaining his independence.

The other state, however…

He would have gasped if he possessed a mouth to do so.

Sunny had become one with the graceful stone knight.

He was not in control of her body, but he shared her perception of the world. He could feel the coolness of the intricate onyx armor where it touched his stonelike skin, the subdued depth of the great power dwelling in his flawless body, the warmth of the divine flame that burned in his chest like an eternal engine, the flow of ruby dust in his veins.

He could also hear everything Saint heard, which was more than even a Transcendent human could, and see everything she saw. His field of vision was somewhat obstructed by the narrow slit of the visor of his helmet, but still surprisingly wide.

Everything seemed different from how Sunny remembered it, not only because Saint's eyes were not at all like his, but also because she was much taller than any human, and her point of view was much higher.

Sunny could also feel the more esoteric parts of her perception — the mass of darkness that dwelled in his heart, the flow of it around him, and other things there which had no names in the human language.

It was probably what Cassie experienced when she used her Ascended Ability and shared all senses with another being.

Saint was much more similar to a human than Sunny would have expected. However, at the same time, the structure of her body and her senses were entirely alien, and would have made him dizzy if not for the fact that Sunny had already become accustomed to inhuman perspectives through Shadow Dance and his extensive use of Shadow Shell.

Only, this way, he was submerged into the alien point of view much deeper, further, and more comprehensively than ever before. It was quite a revelation.

In any case, it was… exhilarating. Sunny's own body was a well-oiled machine tempered in countless battles to be a perfect vessel for him, a pinnacle of athletic achievement — it was responsive, strong, nimble, enduring, properly conditioned, and most of all

Transcendent. However, Saint's physicality was something different.

She was a masterpiece created by the Demon of Choice, after all.

Her being was more solid, monolithic, and purposeful. It was a work of art as much as it was a living thing, and now, its power was further enhanced both by the darkness and by the shadows.

Sunny could also sense faint echoes of Saint's unshakeable will.

He could feel it…

Her calmness, her cold confidence, her pride. A hint of recognition she felt while facing Revel… because Revel was a Beast's spawn, and Saint had battled others of her kin in the great war of old.

'How strange.'

Sunny could not read Saint's thoughts, but he did understand something about her. It was that the memories of her past life were not entirely gone. However, they weren't entirely there, either… not quite erased, but dim and faint, like a distant dream. A dream that someone else had dreamt, perhaps.

Before she was a Shadow.

It was a mercy, no doubt, considering that most of those memories were tainted by the madness of Corruption.

As a Shadow…

Saint gripped the hilt of the Soul Serpent. The black odachi rippled and shifted its form, turning into a heavy straight sword. Then, a stream of darkness flowed from under her gauntlet, enveloping the sharp blade and fusing with the stygian steel.

She turned her head and faced her two enemies — Princess Revel of the Great Clan Song and the abominable creature that mirrored her existence.

Then, Saint stared them down with cold indifference, calmly raised her sword, and struck it twice against the rim of her shield.

Sharing her senses, Sunny trembled with excitement.

'...I think I understand why she does it now.'

Honestly, it felt rather cool.

Chapter-1890: Dark Tide

Now that Sunny could see through Saint's eyes, the ravaged hall of the ancient Citadel was revealed to him once again. It had changed drastically in a short span of time…

The outer wall was partially missing, torn open by Fiend's charge. Splinters and debris littered the cracked floor. The scarlet vines and the roots of the trees that had protruded from the ceiling were decimated, filling the air with a sweet fragrance while they bled viscous — and undoubtedly toxic — sap.

Everything was drowning in darkness.

Before, Sunny had always seen darkness like a billowing cloud of nothingness — an impenetrable black barrier that was uniform and featureless, obscuring the world from his senses. However, now, he saw it in a new light… or rather, the opposite of light.

To Saint's eyes, darkness was rich and full of nuance. It flowed all around them, its fluid torrents creating beautiful patterns in the air. Moving, ebbing, changing… almost like a living creature. The dark splendor of that scene was subtle and breathtaking.

Sadly, Sunny had no time to enjoy the beauty of darkness, because Lightslayer was not wasting even a moment.

To his surprise, Revel herself was like a part of the elemental darkness she had unleashed. When she moved, her body seemed to become one with the flow of it, dissolving into ethereal dark liquid before coalescing back into a tangible form — because of that, she could travel to any point in the hall with such tremendous speed that it almost seemed instantaneous.

The Reflection, which mirrored her appearance perfectly, was the same.

'A movement Aspect Ability? Or a partial Transformation?'

Sunny did not know.

A split second later, Saint was attacked from both sides.

Revel was far too strong and powerful for a Transcendent Beast, which meant that at least one of the Abilities granted her a physical augmentation — quite similar to Saint's own [Mantle of Darkness]. Although it was hard to judge, Sunny suspected that the extent of that augmentation was greater than even Effie's own potent physical enhancement.

Effie's Dormant Ability was universal, though, while Revel's seemed to only work within the bounds of true darkness. So, there was some kind of balance to her unreasonably powerful Aspect, at least.

Of course, another of her Abilities allowed her to summon a flood of elemental darkness to anywhere she was. That was quite a problem.

Revel attacked from the left, while the Reflection attacked from the right. Both strikes were insidious, devastating, and potent… however, Saint was undeterred.

Blocking one blow with her shield and deflecting another with her sword, she easily avoided the sharp blades and took a small step while shifting her weight. Simultaneously, she bent the elbow of her sword arm and rotated her wrist, binding Revel's sword and pulling her closer.

Although Saint faced two powerful enemies alone, her own augmented power was no less fearsome than theirs. On top of that, she was much taller than both of them, and possessed much greater mass.

As for her skill… she wasn't called a Battle Master without reason.

[Battle Master] Attribute Description: "Born on the battlefield, the Onyx Saint is proficient in all forms of combat."

Her actions, while small and frugal, allowed her to create a little distance between herself and the Reflection while simultaneously

drawing closer to Revel. With their swords still entangled in a bind, she ruthlessly struck with the rim of her shield, aiming to crack open Revel's skull.

Lightslayer was forced to disengage — dissolving into a torrent of fluid darkness, she instantly moved several meters back. At the same time, the Reflection used the opportunity to deliver a blow to Saint's momentarily unprotected side.

But the graceful knight was already bringing her shield back, pushing the enemy's blade down with its rim. The sharp do scraped fruitlessly against the side of her greave.

The whole clash took less than a heartbeat.

And in the next dozen seconds, countless clashes like that happened in an unceasing succession, turning the dark hall of the ancient castle into a scene of chilling destruction.

The thunderous sounds of clashing steel fused into a deafening litany. Powerful shockwaves spread in all directions, decimating what little tendrils of the scarlet infestation there were left. The ceiling crumbled, and the floor collapsed.

The Citadel had obviously been built from mystical materials, considering that it withstood the passage of time and countless disasters that must have befallen it in the Hollows — and yet, it could not withstand the violent forces unleashed by the battle.

Sunny was in awe.

He had never had a chance to experience someone else's battle skill so clearly, so vividly, and so intimately. And it wasn't just anyone's skill, at that — it was the sublime technique of Saint herself, who was one of the most fearsome warriors he had ever met.

Measured, calculated, and insidiously lethal.

Solid, grounded, and explosively destructive.

It was both a joy and a privilege, to be exposed to such excellence without any barriers. To not only observe how Saint fought, but also

feel and experience it as if her body was his own, as was her will.

Granted… the actual situation was quite dire.

Saint plummeted through the broken floor and landed heavily on the wooden surface of the level below, which cracked slightly under her prodigious weight. Splinters and debris rained down, and darkness flowed from above, swiftly drowning everything around.

Her intricate onyx armor was battered, its surface covered by cracks in a few places. There was some ruby dust scattered across the polished surface, as well — she had received several wounds.

Luckily, her wounds were able to heal faster when surrounded by true darkness, and since Revel and her Reflections had generously provided copious amounts of the rare element, those shallow cuts were already healed.

Her two enemies followed, coalescing from the torrents of darkness and immediately resuming their assault.

Neither side had a decisive advantage — while Saint was being pressed by Revel and the Reflection, she was like an indomitable wall of stonelike metal. Their attacks shattered against her shield and armor, while her own blade was a lethal threat.

Sadly, Saint wasn't able to harm either of her adversaries in turn. For the moment, the furious battle had reached a fragile stalemate.

A few moments later, both Lightslayer and the Reflection disengaged, their raven-black hair flying in the wind. Revel paused for a moment and looked at Saint, a harsh expression settling on her beautiful face.

The Princess of Song remained silent for a second, then said in a low tone:

"A creature of darkness… just where did that man find you?"

Sunny did not have to answer, and Saint wasn't going to, either.

She stared down at Revel with her usual indifference, then raised her sword slightly, preparing to attack.

However, at that moment, it seemed as if Lightslayer had come to a decision.

She smiled coldly, and in the next moment, the surrounding darkness enveloped her like a mantle…

At the same time, the entire Citadel suddenly shook, and a deafening sound of splintering wood reached them from somewhere high above.

Chapter-1891: Negative Power

Earlier…

On the highest floor of the ancient Citadel, Nephis was standing in the middle of a blooming garden. All around her, heavy branches leaned under the weight of scarlet flowers, and a sweet fragrance permeated the air.

Three women surrounded her — one of them was Moonveil, the Princess of Song. The other two were most likely Reflections created by Mordret, the estranged son of the King of Swords.

Drops of blood were falling from the cut on her cheek.

Nephis looked at her fingers, which were smeared in blood, with a frown.

'They prepared well.'

The current situation was troubling enough, but what dismayed her more was how thoroughly the daughters of Ki Song seemed to be informed about Godgrave and the movements of the Sword Army.

Venturing into the Hollows should not have been an easy task — otherwise, she would not have needed an army of Awakened soldiers to carve a path through the scarlet jungle. She could have simply led a team of Saints on a clandestine excursion.

But she had not. That was because while Saints could brave the perils of the Hollows, they could not do it for long. Sooner or later, they would meet something that they could not defeat or escape from — and even if they didn't, their essence would run out, leaving them stranded in the heart of the ancient jungle. Then, they would die.

Even with a guide like the Lord of Shadows, her own forces had only

dared to descend into the Hollows after reaching the vicinity of the Second Rib — and that was already a much more dangerous plan than the initial one.

Knowing where exactly the Citadels were located was supposed to be an advantage of the Sword Domain.

However, Lightslayer and her sisters had reached this Citadel first, and without an army. Gods only knew how they had managed that, but they had… was it because of the Beast lineage? Or something else entirely?

Worse than that, they seem to know too much about the champions of the Sword Army. Song definitely had spies among the warriors of Valor, but were they that capable? Or was it all due to Death Singer, the blood oracle? After all, although the future could not be glimpsed anymore, the same could not be said about the present.

Or was it all the fault of the Prince of Nothing? Had he done more than just fight his way to the Nameless Temple when visiting the Lord of Shadows before the war?

Nephis did not know, but she did know that the Sword Army — her army — had failed to outmaneuver the enemy.

Now, her Saints were being slaughtered down below. The Lord of Shadows was fighting Dark Dancer Revel, whose powers seemed to directly counter his.

And she herself was cornered by Moonveil, somehow robbed of her powers.

The situation was dire. Not only had Song managed to take control of the Citadel, but they could very well deal a fatal blow to the Sword Army by eliminating fourteen of its Saints, including two of its strongest champions — herself and Sunny.

Sunny…

The image of him bleeding on Revel's sword flashed in Neph's mind.

He did not really bleed, but still…

The corner of her mouth curved downward, and her gaze grew cold.

She looked at Moonveil and said in an even tone:

"Your power is to negate the Aspects of others."

The princess of Song just smiled silently.

'What a potent Ability…'

Nephis strained against the imperceptible barrier that prevented her from summoning her flames, but it was all for naught. It was as if her Aspect did not exist at all… or rather, was subdued. She did feel a sense of resistance, but the force of suppression was too great to overcome.

Even her Memories seemed to be weakened. Perhaps that was why the moonlight arrow had pierced the armor of Saint Sagramore so easily.

Perhaps if Moonveil was alone, Nephis could have broken through — her Aspect was of the Divine Rank, after all, and she was of divine lineage. Her soul was that of a Titan. But the power of two Reflections seemed to have been added to the geas, making it nearly indestructible.

Lightslayer's power directly countered that of the Lord of Shadows. The Saint of Sorrow could prevent Sir Jest from playing with the minds of Ki Song's daughters.

And Nephis herself was countered by Moonveil — or rather, Moonveil was a natural counter to any Awakened. That delicate woman, with her slender build and soft features…

Was probably the most dreadful foe any Awakened could face.

There had to be some limitations to her power, certainly. Otherwise, she would not have transported Nephis away from the rest of the Saints — she would have simply negated all their powers, turning them defenseless.

Nephis looked at her bloodied fingers once again.

'The arrow.'

She had only discovered that her Aspect was sealed after the moonlight arrow cut her cheek, and some of its radiance seemed to linger in the cut.

Nephis remained motionless for a moment, then turned her gaze back to Moonveil.

"You said that the name Black Moon suits you better."

The Princess of Song smiled softly.

"Indeed."

Nephis took a deep sigh and circulated her essence.

Her Aspect was sealed, but her essence could still move.

Therefore, the situation was not too dire.

It could still be salvaged.

Because she had noticed that Moonveil… Black Moon… was not using any of her Aspect Abilities, either. So, suppressing someone else's powers must have come at the cost of suppressing her own.

Which meant that Nephis was still a Transcendent Titan facing three Transcendent Beasts. Although her body was still that of a human, she was stronger and faster than most other Saints. She would not lose to anyone in a conquest of pure physicality and skill.

No…

Those Reflections could have been mirroring a Transcendent being, but she could feel that they were much more powerful than Moonveil herself. Supreme Beasts, then.

It was still not impossible for her to win.

And even if it had been impossible…

She would win somehow, anyway, because defeat was not an option.

"Thank you for telling me, Black Moon."

Saying that, Nephis dashed toward the daughter of Ki Song without wasting another breath.

And as she did, she burned her essence and spoke the Names, channeling them into a crude Phrase.

In that Phrase, the name of Black Moon was woven together with the name of destruction.

Chapter-1892: Purity of Steel

Moonveil was armed with a saber. When Nephis attacked, her own sword — the Kinslayer — fell on it like a bolt of silver lightning. She had activated one of its enchantments, infusing the somber blade with elemental damage, and, at the same time, called upon the Nameless Sun and the Testament of Malice.

The former gifted the mirror sword with the ability to damage souls, while the latter augmented its edge with a corrosive quality — not too potent, but cumulative.

Nephis had activated the enchantments of her armor, as well — those were mostly defensive in nature, supporting her body in its lunge.

The more enchantments she used, the more of her essence would be drained. But without the demanding expenditure of her Divine Aspect, essence was the only thing that Nephis had at her disposal — there was no point in trying to conserve it.

All her Memories were augmented by the Crown of Dawn, which she had worn since the Forgotten Shore. And yet…

The suppressive force of Moonveil and her Reflections was so powerful that the Memories still felt weak and impotent. It was as if her armor was made of paper, and her sword was made from rusty steel.

The Kinslayer still held, but Nephis had a feeling that she would have to request another suit of armor from the enchanters of Clan Valor after the battle was over.

Sadly, they could not craft her a new body.

Despite Moonveil's soft appearance, she was a skilled fighter — Nephis would not have expected anything less from a princess of

Song. Additionally, her delicate body seemed to possess fierce, bestial strength. She deflected the Kinslayer easily, shifting her weight and placing her saber at an angle that would both channel and dissipate the force of the impact.

Moonveil's expression was calm.

However, it changed the instant the two blades met.

Nephis had barely started to construct the Phrase, but it was already starting to Shape the world. The blade of the saber was chipped deeply and almost shattered, while Moonveil's bones almost snapped. The Queen's daughter reeled back with a stifled hiss, and looked at her opponent with a stunned expression.

Nephis had no time to enjoy her shock.

The two Reflections were already upon her.

There was a swarm of sparks swirling around her arm — the Memory she was trying to summon only took a few short seconds to manifest. However, in a battle like this one, a few seconds could become an eternity.

The world exploded into a whirlwind of violence.

Nephis was strong and swift, but fighting against three enemies was a losing affair. Neither Moonveil nor the Reflections were weak, and they had the priceless advantage of being able to attack her simultaneously from all directions, working together to mangle her body and end her life.

All Nephis had was her swordsmanship… but that was what she knew best.

Everything seemed to disappear into the melodious song of steel. Her mind was cleansed of all unnecessary thoughts, entering a state of absolute, transcendent concentration.

A million observations, conclusions, and calculations were being conceived in it at the same time.

Nephis knew her every muscle, every tendon, every bone, every nerve. Her essence flowed and raged, enhancing her body just at the right time, and in just the right amount.

The length of her sword, the tensile strength of its silvery blade. The multitude of forces affecting what each impact did, and how it was resolved. The movements of her enemies, and those of her own — all of it was like a complicated dance that followed a beautiful logic, and one who understood that logic could set the pace and cadence of the dance.

Above it all was another, much more labyrinthine layer. The layer of skill and intent. Nephis understood them well, too — granted, her insight was inferior to what Cassie was capable of, and Sunny seemed to be as well. But it was enough to read what the enemy would do, most of the time.

So, she held on.

Her sword was like a flowing stream of silver metal, moving so fast that it almost seemed to turn into a sphere around her. Her every step, every move were flawlessly calculated and optimal, allowing her to defend against the three enemies at the same time. She blocked, deflected, and evaded a suffocating onslaught of blows, preventing Moonveil from making her bleed.

For now.

It was… strange, to fight without using her Aspect.

Nephis had almost forgotten what it was like, to only rely on her trained body and her skill as a swordsman. True, she called upon her powers as scarcely as she could, always attempting to win without resorting to her Aspect — but the circumstances rarely allowed it, and even if she managed to hold out, the knowledge that her flames were hers to command was always there.

She had expected that having to fight without them, and even without the possibility of summoning them, would be limiting and suffocating.

But, in fact, it was liberating.

It was almost euphoric, because for the first time in a long, long time… she was free of pain.

Such a simple thing, but it changed the feeling of this battle completely.

Nephis should have been tense, somber, and on the verge of despair.

She should have been clawing at the chance to turn the situation around.

She should have been missing her powers bitterly.

But instead, she was relieved.

The relief washed over her like a tide, and the simple delight of giving herself completely to the sword put a faint smile on her face.

Her smile seemed to surprise Moonveil.

The princess of Song hesitated for a moment, then asked between two graceful slashes of her saber:

"Why are you smiling, Changing Star?"

Nephis blocked an attack from one of the Reflections, caught another blow on her vambrace and staggered back, feeling a stream of blood flowing into her palm.

Her smile did not waver.

"It's just… refreshing. To be powerless, for once."

With that, she released the hilt of her sword with one hand and outstretched her bloodied palm outward.

At that moment, the swirling sparks finally manifested into a Memory.

That Memory was a torch of black wood, a mass of ghostly blue flame burning in a silver cage on its top.

The blue flames reflected in the placid depth of her calm, grey eyes.

Chapter-1893: Child of Darkness

The garden temple standing in the middle of the dark lake shuddered, and for a moment, the dim twilight of the Hollows was illuminated by a brilliant blaze of cold light.

Powerful torrents of ghostly blue flame shot from the overgrown windows on the higher floor of the castle, extending dozens of meters in all directions like rays of a fiery star. The vines and branches covering the embrasures were instantly reduced to ash.

For a split second, the world seemed frozen. Then, a net of brilliant cracks revealed itself on the ancient walls, and the entire top of the castle disappeared in the annihilating radiance of a violent explosion.

A vast flower of blue flame blossomed above the dark lake. A cloud of burning splinters was shot outward like shrapnel, and a deafening thunder rolled across the surging water like a roar. The immense spire of the castle tilted slowly, collapsing into the flames, and then plummeted down from a great height.

As the billowing mass of flames rose into the air, the trees and vines permeating the devastated upper floors of the Citadel caught fire. The fire enveloped them hungrily, already spreading down.

Far below, Saint stood her ground as the entire structure of the castle quaked. In front of her, Lightslayer was enveloped by a whirlpool of darkness — her lithe body was obscured by the dark torrent, as if she had become one with it.

And then, something moved in the darkness.

The darkness took shape, and suddenly, Saint had to raise her head to look her enemy in the eye.

Revel had retained most of her human features... it was just that her

beauty had become even more breathtaking. Her height had increased, as well, reaching almost four meters. Her raven hair seemed to have grown longer, and two obsidian horns were protruding from her head, curving slightly.

Two black, bat-like wings grew from her back, each crowned with a sharp obsidian spike.

With her flawless alabaster skin and tenebrous eyes, she was like a beautiful demon of darkness… or a fallen angel, perhaps.

A moment later, her hypnotic gaze flashed with sudden intensity, and she lunged forward. Her curved sword had increased in size, as well, turning into a semblance of an odachi — or whatever the equivalent of an odachi for a do sword was.

Her Reflection was already enveloped in a whirlpool of darkness, as well.

Saint silently dashed forward to meet the attack.

Revel's sword collided with her shield, almost causing her arm to buckle. The taciturn knight stubbornly withstood the terrifying force of the impact, but it was still dreadful enough to send her staggering back a couple of steps.

However, at the same moment, one of Revel's wings shot forward like a scorpion's tail, and the sharp obsidian spike — or a talon, perhaps — flashed above the rim of the round shield, piercing Saint's armor and her chest.

It wasn't easy to break the onyx armor of the Underworld, but Lightslayer's wing did so easily.

The wing retreated as fast as it had struck, preventing Saint from slashing it with her sword. But the other one was already descending to sting her from the other side…

A stream of ruby dust flowed from the gruesome wound on her chest, painting the onyx armor red.

Saint calmly moved her shield to deflect the obsidian talon. The blow

pushed her back once again, and a split second later, Revel spread her first wing as it retreated, slashing at the Shadow with its edge.

The edge of her wing was sharper than a sword. Saint blocked it with her sword, but a deep scratch was left on her gauntlet.

Revel's sword was already flying to slide into the visor of her helmet. Her ability to use her weapon and her wings to create a seamless flood of dreadful attacks was both strange and mesmerizing, elegant like a dance and lethal like death's own embrace. Each movement flowed effortlessly into another, creating a dark and morbid spectacle.

Behind them, the Reflection had already finished its Transformation.

The demonic creatures attacked Saint simultaneously, unleashing an onslaught of attacks so terrifying that any other Transcendent Devil would have been annihilated in a moment.

But the graceful stone knight facing them was not just any devil. She was one of the Stone Saints, children of the Underworld. Empowered by the blessing of shadows, she was far too fearsome to be easily defeated.

More than that, while Revel's Aspect countered that of her master, Saint herself thrived in the elemental darkness called forth by the princess of Song.

The dark hall was soon ruined by a hurricane of onyx and steel. The three powerful creatures fighting a lethal battle under the collapsed ceiling of the ancient chamber moved with astonishing speed, the fury of their fight so tremendous that the mystical wood around them groaned and trembled, and the darkness itself seemed to cower in fright.

Saint remained as cold and indifferent as always, her ruby eyes shining with crimson flames. Her battered shield had resisted countless blows, and her dark blade had tasted the blood of the enemy on a few occasions.

Sadly, all the wounds she had managed to deliver Revel and her

Reflection were shallow and insignificant.

Her own armor, meanwhile, was terribly shredded by now, breached in a dozen places, and smeared in ruby dust.

However, surrounded by true darkness, Saint simply would not succumb to the terrible wounds. Instead, they were healing with startling speed. The gash on her chest had already closed, and the rest of them were not far behind.

Still… she could not continue in this manner for much longer. Albeit slowly, her enemies were gaining the upper hand. The longer this battle continued, the weaker she would grow, and the greater their advantage would become.

The hall was slowly filling with the smell of smoke.

Making a decision, Saint strained her tattered body and momentarily pushed both creatures of darkness back.

None of them moved for a short moment, gathering the strength for the next attack.

Saint stared at the beautiful demoness, Revel, silently…

And then dropped her battered shield to the ground.

Her weapon rippled and elongated, turning into a heavy greatsword.

It was as if she was abandoning all pretence of defense in favor of uncompromising offense.

In favor of an indomitable will to see her enemies dead no matter the cost.

The crimson flames burning behind her cracked visor shone with cold light.

Chapter-1894: Mutually Assured Salvation

Sunny had been a silent companion for Saint, losing himself in the sensations of the furious battle. Revel was strong — too strong, even… in hindsight, he might have become somewhat arrogant after attaining Transcendence, which caused him to underestimate the champions of Song.

Why wouldn't the first Saint among the Queen's daughters be exceptionally strong? Sure, Revel had always been unassuming, avoiding the spotlight and public attention. There were no tales about her deeds or news about her achievements in recent years. In fact, Sunny did not think that he had ever seen a recording of her appearing in broad daylight…

And yet, he should have been more wary of the seven Transcendent sisters, who had been raised by a Sovereign and inherited the lineage of Beast God.

Sunny was still confident that he could defeat each of them in battle — just like he was confident that he could defeat Morgan.

…If not for the fact that Revel wielded power over elemental darkness as a weapon and was aided by Mordret. That devious bastard.

How was he still causing problems for Sunny all the way from the shores of the Stormsea?

Luckily, Saint countered Lightslayer's Aspect just like it countered Sunny's own. So, he wasn't too worried...

Until she discarded her shield and shifted her stance.

At that moment, Sunny finally sensed a hint of alarm.

He remembered that stance… it was a sign that she was abandoning her usual conservative technique in favor of a savage and chillingly lethal one, which was utterly ruthless — both to her enemies and to herself.

The darkness was permeated by the smell of smoke.

The roar of the explosion they had heard earlier must have been caused by Nephis. She had not detonated her soul cores, it seemed — otherwise, the entire Citadel would have been reduced to a pile of rubble. So, the explosion must have been caused by her Aspect, the Sorcery of Names, or both.

It was a sign that she was still alive and fighting, at least. However, Sunny was struggling to understand what could have stalled her for so long… he had expected her to deal with the enemy sooner rather than later.

It was all up to Saint.

'Stay safe…'

His Shadow took a step forward, then unexpectedly kicked her round shield with terrible force. The battered shield shot from the cracked floor like a discus, colliding with the Reflection and sending it reeling back.

The graceful stone knight was already lunging at Revel.

Saint ignored the obsidian talons and allowed them to pierce her armor freely — one dislodged her pauldron and tore open her shoulder, the other brushed against the side of her helmet, shattering it into pieces.

Her hair fluttered in the wind, and her inhumanly beautiful face was revealed, expressionless and smeared in ruby dust.

In the next moment, her dark greatsword collided with Revel's blade, threw it aside, and cleaved into her wing.

Lightslayer's body was protected by leather armor, but her wings were not. Augmented by the elemental darkness, the black sword practically severed one of them, forcing Lightslayer to let out a pained groan.

Pure darkness flowed from the severed wing instead of blood.

But Saint was not done… no, she was only beginning.

Not encumbered by the need to defend herself anymore, she had become a harbinger of death. Even if it was mutually assured destruction, her enemies were the ones being destroyed first…

Which put them in a difficult situation.

Sunny stirred, starting to understand what Saint was doing.

She slammed the crossguard of her sword into Revel's chest, pushing her back, then spun to deflect the attack of the Reflection. Their weapons clashed, producing a shockwave, and Saint traded another wound with the enemy — she tilted her head to avoid being dealt a fatal blow, and the obsidian talon sank into her shoulder instead.

Her ruby eyes flashed with cold contempt.

Removing one hand from the hilt of the sword, she grabbed the talon, trapping it in her stonelike flesh to prevent the wing from retreating, and drove the tip of the sword through the Reflections's abdomen.

At that moment, Revel attacked from behind.

For a few moments, the three of them were entangled in a bloody struggle, then disengaged, all bearing terrible wounds.

Saint had been mangled more gruesomely than her enemies, but they had not escaped unscathed, either.

Sunny felt a sense of bitter rage at how hurt his taciturn Shadow was, but at the same time…

He wanted to laugh.

Because he had finally understood Saint's intention.

In truth, she wasn't trying to sacrifice herself to kill the enemy — he would not have allowed her to, anyway. Instead, she was betting her life on the fact that the enemy would not allow her to do so, either.

Saint was fighting Revel and her Reflection… but Revel was only fighting a mere servant of the Lord of Shadows. If she let herself be heavily wounded, or worse yet, killed, the Lord of Shadows would win.

In other words, Saint could pursue the strategy of mutually assured destruction to defeat the enemy, but Revel could not, because all she would be destroying was a minion of the enemy, not the enemy himself.

'How devious!'

Had his noble, prideful Saint picked up a few treacherous tricks after following him for all these years?

In any case, the battle reached a forced stalemate.

The beautiful demon of darkness, Revel, stared at the battered Shadow with a grim expression.

After a few moments, she uttered through gritted teeth:

"...Dammit."

Her mesmerizing voice sounded like the song of the lightless abyss, but Sunny was more interested in the emotion hidden in that one short word.

It was anger.

'What are you going to do now?'

Sunny wasn't sure what Revel would do…

But he already knew what his next action would be, and had to act fast.

So, he allowed himself to be separated from Saint and quietly flowed down her arm...

Onto the blade of the Soul Serpent.

Chapter-1895: Body of Steel

Sunny broke his fusion with Saint and glided onto the blade of the Soul Serpent, wrapping himself around the blade of the serpentine greatsword. Robbed of his support, the taciturn knight swayed slightly — however, considering how severely injured she was, that sudden sign of weakness did not look out of place.

Revel did not notice anything, assuming that the inhumanly beautiful creature was simply wounded too terribly.

Sunny fused with Serpent, and was dazed for a split second. Being one with Saint had already been a strange enough feeling — however, becoming a sword was an entirely alien experience.

Sunny had no blood, no eyes, no limbs. His body was rigid and uncompromising, forged for a single purpose — to cut, cleave and carve, severing living beings from the concept of life. Held in the firm hand of his wielder, he was where he was meant to belong.

His edge was sharp. His purpose was clear.

His resolve was absolute.

…The difference between everything Sunny was familiar with and this adamant existence was so immense that his mind simply failed to fathom it. He wasn't even sure what part of him came from Serpent, and what part of him came from the sword. There were countless nuances he was failing to comprehend, countless layers of himself he could feel, but not understand.

However, even these few short moments were a revelation.

While augmenting Saint, Sunny had already guessed that fusing with his Shadows could guide him to the next step of Shadow Dance. But now that he had become one with Serpent in its Soul Weapon form,

he made another guess.

His shadows could augment Memories, too. So… wouldn't his weaving undergo a tremendous improvement if he studied the Memories by fusing with them, as well? Was that the catalyst he had been missing in his quest to forge a soulbound sword?

These prospects were both fascinating and tantalizing. Sadly, there was no time to consider them fully…

Because he was still in the middle of a dire battle, and that battle was about to reach its climax.

The short moment of inaction was coming to an end. Revel and the Reflection were preparing to move despite their wounds… from what Sunny could tell, Lightslayer had made up her mind and chosen a solution to the problem posed by Saint.

She was going to sacrifice the Reflection to destroy the servant of the Lord of Shadows, and then deal with the master herself.

At least that was what Sunny would have done.

So, he had to prevent that from happening.

He regretted not having teeth… because right now would have been a perfect time to grit them.

'What would a sword with a set of teeth even look like?'

The sudden thought brushed against his mind, uninvited.

It was better not to imagine.

'Saint, now!'

He gave her a mental command.

Before Revel and the Reflection moved, Saint shifted slightly. Her shattered armor groaned, and ruby dust spilled into the flowing darkness. She raised both hands above her head, as if preparing to deliver a powerful downward slash.

However, instead of it, the graceful Shadow leaned forward...

And hurled the dark greatsword at Revel with all her Transcendent strength.

It was truly a foolish move, really. Not only could Lightslayer easily dodge or deflect the makeshift projectile, but Saint was also leaving herself unarmed and defenseless. A dire mistake in a fight that she was already losing.

It was just that…

As Revel moved her ssangsudo to swat the dark greatsword to the side, Sunny gave another command.

Instantly, the sword rippled and changed shape, expanding into a vaguely human silhouette. That silhouette then swelled, turning into a monstrous figure as it landed heavily on the wooden floor and lunged at the princess of Song.

He had ordered Serpent to assume a new form.

Sunny had considered carefully which of the silent shadows dwelling in his soul he would choose. Initially, his mind turned to the most obvious one — the Black Knight of the ruined cathedral of the Dark City, his old nemesis.

The Black Knight had been a fearsome and dreadful foe. Best of all, he had commanded true darkness, possessing several potent abilities tied to it — it was by slaying the ruthless guardian of the cathedral that Saint evolved for the first time.

Now that they were surrounded by the same element, Serpent could borrow the affinity to it from the Black Knight's shadow by assuming the form of the mass of darkness wearing a set of cursed armor.

However, once Sunny contemplated the choice more, he realized that it was a poor one. The Black Knight had seemed formidable once, true — but he was merely a Fallen Devil. What had been a deadly foe once was now a trivial threat to someone like Sunny… and to Revel as well.

Truthfully, none of the forms Serpent could assume could pose a threat to the princess of Song — at least not anymore.

If they had been the ones to ambush the forces of Song, the shape of the Terror of LO49, Sybil of the Fallen Grace, could have helped Sunny decimate the enemy. If they had been fighting in a vast open space, the shape of the Remnant of the Jade Queen could have rained destruction on the enemies from above.

But now, none of these shapes could contend against Revel. She would destroy them easily, not wasting any time.

And Sunny desperately needed her to waste it.

So, the shape that Serpent had assumed…

Was a creature that resembled a towering, monstrous mix between a human and a wolf. It was tall and covered in thick, wild fur. Its maw was bared in a bestial snarl, revealing terrifying fangs, and each of its claws was like a curved sword.

...It was the form of Saint Dire Fang, a fallen retainer of the Great Clan Song, whom Sunny had killed during the Battle of the Black Skull, and whose Echo he later lost in the Nightmare Desert.

Chapter-1896: Divide and Conquer

Serpent pushed himself forward with his powerful legs, while his long arms stretched toward Revel.

Or rather, toward where Revel had been a moment ago.

In the shape of a sword, Serpent had no way to see, hear, or sense. In the shape of Dire Fang, it was blinded by the darkness — and so was Sunny.

Of course, they weren't entirely aimless.

One of Dire Fang's Aspect Abilities could tremendously enhance his senses, after all. They were so sharp that Sunny could hear the smallest of sounds, discern a myriad of smells, and even feel the vibrations of the floor intricately enough to pinpoint the movement of his enemies.

So, they had a good chance of reaching Revel.

Sadly, they also had zero chance of defeating her in a brawl. As someone who had fought Dire Fang, Sunny knew perfectly well what the bestial body of the savage Saint was capable of — and it fell way short of what Lightslayer could do.

Worse still, Dire Fang's Awakened Ability, which augmented his physical might in proportion to the depth of wrath he felt, was all but useless when used by Serpent. The original Saint had a brutal personality and an eerie measure of control over his emotions, but Serpent was not very wrathful. In fact, Sunny did not know if that Shadow of his could even feel anger.

Serpent had not inherited the Transcendent battle art of the dead

Saint, either.

In short, they would not be able to rip Revel apart with Dire Fang's claws.

But they did not need to, luckily. Because their goal was different…

All they had to do was stall the princess of Song long enough to give Saint a little room to breathe.

And for that purpose, the shape of Dire Fang was perfect.

Revel was strong enough, swift enough, and ruthless enough to kill another Saint in a moment — especially in the depths of her whirlwind of darkness, after assuming her Transcendent form. So, Sunny was not going to compete with her in strength, speed, or skill.

Well, technically, he was not going to make Serpent compete.

Instead, he was going to hit her with a mental attack. Not the mystical kind, but entirely mundane — which did not make it any less impactful.

The fact of the matter was that even someone as powerful as Revel would be momentarily stunned if a person who had died years ago suddenly appeared in front of them. Especially if that person was someone they knew, and knew well… like a loyal retainer who had served their clan for decades.

And just as Sunny expected, he heard a shaken whisper in the darkness — almost inaudible if not for the incredible hearing of Serpent's current form.

"...Fang?"

Revel might have only lingered for a moment, but that moment was all that Sunny and Serpent needed.

Before their bestial body could be pierced by the deadly obsidian talon or cut down by the sharp blade, they reached the enemy.

Fighting Revel while blind was not something that Serpent could do.

But wrestling her at close distance? That was much easier to achieve.

Sunny felt his powerful arms wrap around the body of the beautiful demoness, his claws sinking into her leather armor and piercing her skin. Then, Dire Fang's massive body collided with her, sending them both crashing to the ground.

Serpent opened its maw and bit down blindly, aiming for Revel's throat. However, before its sharp fangs could rip it open, two powerful hands caught its jaws like a vice, preventing them from closing.

For a moment, the two of them were entangled on the floor. Lightslayer was much stronger, but Serpent managed to hold on… for now.

Sunny wasn't sure how much longer it would be able to resist, though.

He wasn't sure that Lightslayer's obsidian talon would not pierce his Shadow a split second later, either. Her remaining wing seemed to be trapped under her body, but the situation could change swiftly.

Serpent was trying to tear open Revel's heart, while Revel was calmly ripping off its lower jaw. Sunny felt harrowing pain, and sensed hot blood flowing down his neck.

Behind them, meanwhile…

The moment Saint let go of the dark sword, she ignored her debilitating wounds and dashed toward the Reflection.

The creature hesitated for a short moment, surprised by the sudden appearance of the bestial monster and its immediate lunge at Revel — the Reflection was a mere Beast, after all, and although the intelligence of these creatures followed a different set of laws than that of Nightmare Creatures, it did not seem as smart as a human, or as the original Mirror Beast had been.

The situation would have been even more desperate if the Reflection was a Demon… or worse yet, a Devil. Then, it would not have been limited to mirroring Revel herself — instead, it could have mirrored

Saint, or even Fiend.

In any case, it missed the chance to intercept the graceful stone knight in time.

A moment later, Saint attacked it in cold silence. She had not tried to manifest a sword of darkness once again, since that would have taken more time than she had — instead, she simply used the onyx spikes protruding from the knuckles of her armored gauntlets.

Her first blow shattered the damaged blade of the Reflection.

Saint did not need a sword to kill an enemy — after all, she was a master of all weapons, and that included her own body. She was the one who had taught Fiend hand-to-hand combat, and the student did not surpass the master yet.

The Reflection finally reacted, moving its wings to finish off the living statue with its obsidian talons. But Saint had fought this demonic form for long enough to learn its strengths and weaknesses — she closed in, coming almost face-to-face with the beautiful creature.

Revel's wings were utterly deadly, but their structure dictated a certain effective range — once someone was too close to the princess of Song, hiding behind her body, the lethal talons could not reach them anymore.

While Serpent and the true Lightslayer were crashing into the ground, Saint dodged the Reflections claws, calmly caught its second hand between her right arm and her body…

And then sent her left hand flying forward.

Her aim was the creature's abdomen, which she had pierced with her sword before.

There, the armor was broken. The skin of the Reflection was cut, as well, and so were the adamantine muscles beneath.

Saint looked up at the stolen face of the Supreme Beast with cold indifference. The crimson flames burning in her eyes flashed

menacingly, turning deeper and darker.

In the next moment, her armored gauntlet penetrated the terrible wound.

Awash in blood and flowing darkness, she mercilessly thrust her arm deep into the body of the creature, bending it at the elbow to reach into its ribcage.

Her armored fist closed on what should have been the Reflection's heart.

In the next moment, there was a quiet, melodious sound…

As if an immense pane of glass was shattering somewhere close, but also far away.

Chapter-1897: Above and Below

The top floors of the ancient castle had been destroyed, torn apart by the devastating explosion. The floors below were an inferno of raging flames and billowing smoke. Scorching heat permeated the suffocating darkness, and burning walls were crumbling as they fell down into the surging waters of the distant lake.

In that hell, someone coughed hoarsely, and a pile of debris suddenly moved. A delicate woman threw aside a smoldering support beam that weighed several tons and slowly rose to her feet, her beautiful face smeared with ash.

At almost the same time, another figure rose from the floor, looking around with cold intensity. It was a young woman with silver hair, wearing a severely damaged suit of lustrous armor. In one hand, she was holding a silver sword.

In the other, a broken black torch was dissolving into a whirlwind of white sparks.

Neph's ivory skin was just as pristine as it had been before. Moonveil's body, however, was covered in gruesome burns. She let out a pained hiss and staggered slightly, looking at Nephis with a tortured grimace.

Eventually, her lips parted.

"...You are a Shaper."

Moonveil's voice was full of barely contained shock. It was commendable that she knew about Shaping and managed to recognize it — after all, there were no true practitioners of that extinct sorcery left in modern day… at least none that Nephis knew of, apart from herself.

She took a step in Moonveil's direction, preparing to lunge into an all-out attack.

"Barely."

Time was short.

Nephis had indeed invoked the True Name of Fire and woven it into a simple Phrase to cause the powerful explosion. Her own Aspect was suppressed, so she had used the black torch as the source flame.

The result had exceeded her expectations, but it was not nearly enough to win the battle.

Nephis had escaped the explosion mostly unscathed, since she was all but immune to all kinds of fire except for her own. The Reflections would be relatively fine, as well — they were far too powerful to be destroyed by a mere conflagration. So, she had only a few precious moments to deal with Moonveil.

Moonveil, meanwhile, had suffered the most damage.

Not only because she was a mere Transcendent Beast, but also because Nephis was still burning her essence to channel the True Name of Destruction.

Invoking it demanded a lot from the Shaper, but it was worth it for a killer like her. Calling upon Destruction did not summon a bolt of lightning from the heavens to smite her enemies, and it did not crush them like a shockwave, either.

Instead, the result of invoking that True Name was insidious and subtle.

Nephis had not been falsely modest when she answered Moonveil's question — her mastery of Shaping was indeed rudimentary and devoid of nuance. She had fathomed a fair deal of Names thanks to Ananke's lessons and her Aspect Legacy, but the ways she could channel them were crude, and her Phrases were primitive.

Still, even on her lips, the True Name of Destruction was a fearsome instrument. If she simply channeled it without much guidance, her

attacks would become more destructive than they were supposed to be. If she connected it to an enemy's name — and more so their True Name —then the enemy would become cursed, as if a mystical hex had been placed on them.

Every cut they received would be deeper, and every blow they endured would bruise more. That was why Moonveil had suffered the most from the explosion.

It was as if the world itself was being reshaped to destroy her.

Such was the power of Shaping — the power to bend the world to one's will.

Perhaps it was because Nephis had been stripped of her Aspect, becoming powerless for the first time in many years, that she saw Shaping from a new perspective in that moment.

'Will…'

As Nephis attacked, a sudden thought surfaced in her mind.

Wasn't that the essence of Supremacy, to force one's will upon the world? She was commanding the flames, and she had placed the spell of destruction on Moonveil. Both of those things were bending the world to fit her desires. Of course, she was not achieving that with her own will — instead, she was using the Sorcery of Names as its conduit.

But was there maybe a hint to the path she had to tread in order to attain Supremacy in the miraculous power of Shaping?

Before Neph's sword could even reach Moonveil, there was a booming crash, and one of the Reflections tore through a burning wall, its saber slicing the adamantine wood like paper.

Nephis had lost her torch, but they were surrounded by fire now. She was still channeling its True Name, so she exerted her will and made the scorching flames swell and descend upon the creature, barring its path.

Trying to defeat Moonveil and two Supreme Beasts was not a safe

bet. So, Nephis had chosen the most promising strategy — to disregard the Reflections and aim to eliminate the weakest link, the princess of Song, at all costs.

Still, she wasted a moment of concentration to stall the first Reflection.

Moonveil used that split second to brandish her blade.

She was quite a skilled swordsman herself.

Sharp steel bit deeply into Neph's side through the breach in her mangled armor, and scarlet blood flowed like a stream…

A normal human would have been stunned by pain after receiving such a gruesome wound. Even a trained, seasoned warrior would have reacted, trying to save themselves or reeling back. At the very least, they would have flinched.

But Nephis did not react at all, as if pain did not matter to her. As if being cut by a sharp blade was nothing.

More than that, she indifferently turned her body just a moment before the saber slashed her flesh — not to avoid it, but to make sure that it struck her ribs instead of plunging into her soft abdomen.

Because of that, her sword left a bloody mark on Moonveil's body, forcing the princess of Song to jump back.

Not paying any attention to the bloody wound on her side, Nephis continued her assault. Her face was impassive, and her eyes were calm like two deep lakes.

Inside, however, she was a little regretful.

Because she would not be able to enjoy liberation from pain anymore. Even if being cut by a sharp blade was a mild and meager torment, this wound was only one of many she would have to receive in order to win.

As flames spread and Nephis clashed with Moonveil, eerily indifferent to the excruciating agony and the harm being done to her

body, the princess of Song seemed more and more disturbed.

Eventually, she asked, a curious smile twisting her pale lips:

"Changing Star... what kind of monster are you?"

Nephis brought her sword down and said in her usual, even tone:

"Monster?"

Her sword whistled as it flashed in the air, missing Moonveil's neck by a mere millimeter.

She turned her slash into a perilous thrust in one flawless, flowing motion.

"I don't remember. I haven't been a Monster in a long, long time…"

***

Far below, on the shore of the dark lake, Saint Rivalen of Aegis Rose let out a pained cry and rolled down the stone stairs, leaving a bloody trail in his wake. His Transcendent form had long crumbled, and he was a mere human once again.

One of his eyes was missing, and his golden armor was breached in half a dozen places. Falling into the water, he let out a stifled groan and struggled to stand up.

His enemies did not seem to be in a hurry to finish him off, and yet… his death was inevitable.

"Curses…"

Sir Rivalen swayed and fell to his knees, his blood mixing with the restless water. He looked up with a stalwart expression.

A giant beast that looked like a graceful panther was slowly descending the stone steps. Worse still…

Two human figures were walking in front of it, each bearing terrible wounds.

They were the corpses of two paladins of Valor that the daughter of Ki Song had already killed, brought back to a perverse semblance of life by the villainous queen. His former peers, comrades, and companions.

Sir Rivalen gritted his teeth, knowing that there was no escape.

He wasn't really afraid of death, as long as it was for a noble cause. However… becoming one of these things, being used to harm his fellow knights…

It seemed too vile.

He looked down, at his bloodied reflection in the water, and whispered quietly:

"...I'll have to make sure that my body is entirely destroyed, then."

His voice was weak, but full of resolve.

The enemies were drawing near…

Before Saint Rivalen could do anything, though, he felt the water grow strangely warm around him… searing, even.

Then, it suddenly seethed and surged.

A moment later, a dreadful monster rose from the lake right behind him.

It was a great fiend forged of black metal, with four long arms and infernal flames burning in his malevolent eyes. Rivers of water streamed from his polished, spiked carapace, hissing as they evaporated and turned into clouds of steam.

Towering above the kneeling Rivalen, the fiend looked down at Silent Stalker and the two Transcendent corpses.

Then, he opened his terrible maw and spat a mouthful of glass shards into the lake.

Saint Rivalen was momentarily befuddled.

'What?'

Why did it seem as though the harrowing creature had a disgruntled expression on its ferocious face?

…And why did it seem as if it had been chewing on glass?

Chapter-1898: Chewing on Glass

Inside the ancient Citadel, a terrifying battle was drawing close to a grim conclusion. The interior of the great hall was devastated, and although smoke had not reached here yet, the dark expanse was permeated by sweltering heat. The shattered floor was awash in blood.

The battle had not gone well for the Saints of the Sword Army. Most of them were already dead — only four remained, each struggling to stay alive.

Saint Roan was battered and bloodied, his white mane painted red. His lightning had been extinguished, and although his enchanted armor — a gift from his daughter to celebrate his Transcendence — had served him well, it was now a shredded mess of torn metal, a blow or two away from crumbling into a river of ethereal sparks.

Sir Jest was surrounded from all sides. His Transcendent form was that of a demonic abomination with goat-like horns and malevolent eyes, his gaze overflowing with terrifying malice. He had fared well against the Saint of Sorrow, dealing grievous wounds to his stone opponent, but as his fellow champions of Valor fell one after another, the situation changed for the worse.

Saint Helie was severely injured, as well. Her sides were wet with blood, torn apart by terrible claws. Her beautiful face was pale from pain and fatigue, and her powerful bow had long been destroyed. Even her shield was on the verge of breaking apart, while her spear already had several cracks on its long blade.

The fourth surviving Saint was slumped on the wide back of the Transcendent form, barely conscious from losing too much blood. He was the one who had been struck by Silent Stalker's arrow in the ambush — ironically enough, others were dead, but he still clung to life. Despite that, he was of not much use in the battle.

Their enemies, meanwhile…

Two dreadful great wolves were circling Roan, preparing to finish him off — they were Lonesome Howl and one of her Reflections, both in much better shape than the winged lion.

The second Reflection was pursuing Helie, barely kept back by her spear and shield.

The corpse of the Great Terror had been destroyed, and so were two of the risen Saints. However, three more had been taken by the Queen of Song — now, they surrounded Sir Jest, attacking him to assist the Saint of Sorrow.

The situation was bleak, and none of the Saints of Swords saw a way out. Even Sir Jest did not seem that amused anymore.

His malevolent eyes narrowed, and a deep, inhuman voice resounded in the devastated hall, sending a chill running down the spine of the Saint of Sorrow:

"How troublesome… how frustrating. At this rate, I won't get to see if your intestines are also made of stone…"

His monstrous mouth twisted into a snarl.

Sir Jest threw one of the living corpses aside and lunged at the stone gargoyle, ignoring dead hands tearing at his flesh.

At that moment, however, the great wolf that had been pursuing Helie suddenly spun and leaped at the monstrous satyr, its maw opening to tear the sinister Saint apart.

Saint Helie swayed and staggered, on the verge of succumbing to her wounds.

Lonesome Howl was already lowering her graceful body to the ground, snarling as she prepared to lunge and sink her fangs into Saint Roan's throat.

Then, however…

There was an eerie sound, and every living being in the ruined hall lingered for a moment, turning their attention to the dark portal of the shattered castle gates.

Nothing happened for a split second, and then, a massive silhouette flew from the darkness, crashing into the floor with a pitiful groan.

It was an enormous black panther, her sable fur torn apart and soaked in blood — she was still alive, but just barely.

Lonesome Howl froze for a split second.

And in that split second, an infernal figure of twisted black metal silently appeared from the shadows in the middle of the hall.

Fiend did not waste any time before plunging the already chaotic battle into a state of absolute carnage. His four hands moved at the same time — the lower pair slashed at two Transcendent corpses, instantly reducing them to two piles of bleeding meat, while the upper pair reached forward and grabbed the head of the lunging Reflection.

His dagger-like claws seared the thick fur and easily pierced the wolf's skull. A moment later, he squished the Supreme Beast's head like a rotten pumpkin and tore it apart.

...Having learned a bitter lesson, Fiend did not try to take a bite out of the deceitfully appetizing Reflection.

That was not meat! Instead, it was tasteless glass.

With his arrival, the flow of the battle instantly changed.

***

Somewhere above, Saint grasped the heart of Revel's Reflection and crushed it in her armored fist.

There was a sound akin to a mirror being broken, and the dark creature froze, the light of life slowly disappearing from its beautiful eyes. Then, a strange ripple spread across its body, and a net of thin cracks revealed itself on its alabaster skin.

A moment later, the Reflection shattered into a rain of silver glass. The glass shards scattered on the floor and then dissolved into a stream of light, which was then devoured by the flowing darkness.

Saint lowered her hand tiredly.

Sunny only knew what had happened after hearing the faint sounds of breaking glass. Fused with Serpent, he was in the middle of a fierce brawl against the true Revel — both the beautiful demon of darkness and the bestial monster Serpent had turned into were on the floor, their bodies entangled, trying to rip each other to shreds.

Lightslayer was winning.

There was a disgusting crunch, and a wave of blinding pain sent Sunny into a daze. Dire Fang's lower jaw was now almost torn off, hanging askew on several shreds of mangled flesh, a torrent of blood pouring down on Revel's arms and chest.

Serpent shuddered and reeled back, involuntarily weakening its grasp on her body. That gave Lightslayer enough room to push the massive creature away and pull her leg up, placing it between its body and hers.

Then, with a powerful kick, she sent the monstrous body of Dire Fang flying back.

Still disoriented, Serpent crashed down a dozen meters away, making the floor quake from the force of the impact.

'Ah…'

Sunny pushed down the excruciating pain and tried to assess the situation... which wasn't easy to do, considering that he was still blind.

Saint had to have destroyed the Reflection. So…

What was happening now?

Chapter-1899: Mirrored Darkness

Sunny knew what was supposed to happen.

In fact, it was very simple — the answer was nothing.

Mordret's Reflections were strange creatures, after all. They were neither dead nor alive, neither divine nor profane. A long time ago, when he killed the Mirror Beast on Reckoning Island, the Spell had announced the kill, but did not whisper anything about his shadow growing stronger.

Sunny was banished from the Nightmare Spell now, but the result would be the same. Killing Reflections did not grant him fragments, and no shadow would appear in the silent stillness of his soul.

Therefore, Saint was unlikely to receive any reward for slaying the Supreme Reflection, either. Even its darkness was merely a reflection of Revel's own — now that the living mirror was gone and there was nothing left to reflect it, the false darkness would most likely disappear, as well.

...Which was a real shame. Sunny really felt that Saint deserved to receive a boon after fighting a battle as dreadful as this one had been — especially considering that she had forged her path to Transcendence by taking the essence of Nightmare Creatures wielding powers over true darkness.

Sunny had never been clear on how exactly Saint was able to increase her Class. He did not know how to help her reach a new Rank without the assistance of the Spell, either. So, he had hoped that defeating a being of true darkness, even if it was a Reflection, would grant her some kind of reward.

But it was not meant to be…

Or so he thought.

Even though Sunny could not see anything, he still felt a sudden shift in the atmosphere of the ancient castle.

If he could see, though, he would have witnessed the dark splendor of what was happening around him and Serpent.

Saint stood motionlessly, her unshaken hand still making a fist. Glass sand slowly poured from between her fingers, and at the same time, the fluid darkness around her stirred.

It flowed like a vast whirlpool around the graceful stone knight, whose ruby eyes continued to burn with cold crimson flames in the surging darkness. The ethereal vortex spun faster and faster, pulling more strands of darkness into its silent torrent.

Some distance away, Revel was rising to her feet. Sensing something, she threw a sharp gaze at Saint.

Saint met that gaze calmly, no emotion betraying itself on her inhumanly beautiful, flawless onyx face.

At that moment, the torrent of darkness came alive, and poured into her body.

The darkness entered her chest like a raging flood and was absorbed into her fiery heart.

But that was not all.

Suddenly, Sunny felt a hint of a faintly familiar, terrifying chill.

If he could see, he would have seen the mirrored darkness start to change in the absence of the slain Reflection. Some of it dissolved into wisps of an eerie, chilling white mist…

He knew that mist all too well.

However, Saint was unmoved. Still staring at Revel silently, she

remained motionless… and eagerly absorbed the wisps of the white mist, as well.

All of it happened in the span of several heartbeats, and by the end of it, the sphere of true darkness enveloping the hall of the ancient Citadel had shrunk a bit.

It still drowned their surroundings, though, trapping Sunny in its cold embrace.

Revel smiled coldly.

"...So full of surprises."

As she rose to her feet and looked around in search of her sword, a cold voice suddenly responded from the darkness:

"Don't be shocked just yet."

The voice belonged to Sunny, who had separated himself from Serpent and manifested his avatar into a corporeal form once again.

Without the enhanced perception of Dire Fang's Aspect, he suddenly felt deaf and lost. The true darkness enveloped everything around him, making him blind. It was an uncomfortable position to be in.

But it had to be done.

Serpent was more fragile than Saint and Fiend — it had already received plenty of gruesome wounds, so Sunny silently dismissed the bleeding Shadow.

Saint, meanwhile, was mangled even more terribly. He would have recalled her into the nurturing haven of his lightless soul… however, it was not time yet.

Instead, Sunny spent more of his essence to take control of another incarnation — one of the three shadows that had remained fused with the graceful stone knight, augmenting her battered body.

Instantly, he had returned to the previous state of unity with his taciturn Shadow. He could see the ruined hall through her eyes…

including his own back, which stood between her and Revel.

He could also feel how weak and broken her body was. The flowing darkness caressed it softly, helping the terrible wounds heal — but they weren't healing fast enough, and the damage was too dire.

Saint was in no condition to continue the fight.

There was something else, as well…

Something about her had changed, but he couldn't quite tell what it was.

It wasn't an evolution to a higher Rank, and it wasn't an evolution to a great Class, either.

However, there was definitely a deep, unfamiliar power taking root both in her body and in her soul — or rather, in the vast shadow that served as her soul.

For now, it did not matter. Saint's inability to support him in the battle against Revel did not matter, either — now that the princess of Song was without support, Sunny was confident enough to face her alone.

Especially because he wasn't blind anymore.

Of course, seeing himself from Saint's perspective was a bit strange, as if he was observing himself in the third person. Being robbed of shadow sense left Sunny feeling dazed, too.

But he was nothing if not supremely adaptable. Even in this weird state, he could still fight… and win.

Defeat was not an option, and honestly enough, he had quite a burning desire to make Revel pay for hurting his Shadows.

Smiling viciously behind the mask, Sunny looked up at her.

'Now…'

First of all, he had to prevent her from reaching her sword. Serpent

was gone, after all, and there were no shadows around to manifest into a weapon — so, Sunny was unarmed.

If Revel did manage to pick up her sword, or lived long enough to dismiss it and summon it back, things could become... problematic.

Commanding Saint to retreat, Sunny clenched his fists and dashed forward.

Chapter-1900: Vanquishing Light

Amidst the flames consuming what remained of the pinnacle of the garden temple, Nephis was fighting against Moonveil and her two Reflections. Countless wounds were littering her body, and she felt a strange, nearly forgotten feeling of growing weak from losing too much blood.

Transcendent bodies were tough, but they weren't indestructible. She had accounted for her miraculous physique when calculating how much punishment her body could take without sacrificing too much of its functionality… and that limit was approaching swiftly.

Nevertheless, her expression was calm, and her movements were just as fluid and unrestrained as they had been before. Her hands never wavered on the hilt of her sword.

The battle was ruthless and unrelenting. Triumph and defeat were separated only by a thin, brittle line.

Moonnveil was strong… but Nephis was stronger. Moonveil wielded her saber as if it was an extension of her body, her skill both beautiful and polished to a state of near perfection… but Nephis was a much better swordsman, and had a much deeper command over the cadence of battle.

Even without her Aspect, she could have defeated the proud princess of Song.

But precisely for that reason, there were two Supreme Reflections aiding Moonveil... and dealing with them was much harder.

Someone had evaluated the strength of the Sword Domain champions very well.

Nephis was using Shaping to control the surrounding flames and keep the Reflections at bay. Sometimes, she managed to slow them down, and sometimes, she failed. When facing two or more enemies at the same time, she followed her perilous strategy — to disregard everything in pursuit of killing Moonveil, even if it meant sacrificing her blood and bone.

As a result, the beautiful princess was forced to defend herself without having a chance to launch a counterattack. Her Reflections, however, made up for that with a vengeance.

'Ah. It hurts...'

Both Nephis and Moonveil were bloodied… however, Nephis was bleeding more. Her wounds were more dire, and more plentiful. It was already starting to become a detriment to her strength and mobility — not because she was paralyzed by pain, but simply because her muscles were cut, her tendons were damaged, and her bones were cracked.

She had managed to avoid receiving truly debilitating damage, but the harm done by countless small wounds was slowly mounting.

Moonveil could see that, as well.

Therefore… she grew a little more confident.

Nephis would have smiled if it didn't seem like a lot of effort.

'Got her.'

She remembered being a fairly straightforward person, a long time ago. But somehow, over the years — she couldn't quite remember how — Nephis had come to value deceit and misdirection, even if it was not something she was naturally good at.

She must have learned how to use lies to her advantage by quietly observing people around her. If so, she had been blessed with good teachers.

Shifting her weight from one leg to another, as if preparing to launch a new strike, Nephis grimaced and swayed. It looked like her right

leg, which had been cut gruesomely by one of the Reflections before, finally betrayed her.

The Reflection itself was a dozen meters away, pushed back by a torrent of flame. The other was just behind Nephis, since she had just evaded its attack and sidestepped the creature.

It would take it a little time to spin around and renew its assault.

So, the only one who could use her momentary loss of balance was Moonveil herself.

Strangely enough, Nephis was a good actress. Her act was subtle, but convincing. The grimace she had made was just small enough to look involuntary. The nature of her misstep was reasonable and believable, since her right leg was indeed damaged quite severely. Her eyes even widened slightly, selling the moment of realization more.

If Moonveil hesitated, she did not show it.

Instead, she decisively lunged into a swift attack, her white hair fluttering in the wind.

Neph's gaze instantly turned cold and heavy.

'...Too honest.'

Who would have thought that the fearsome princess of Song would be a little naive?

Abandoning all pretense of weakness, she righted her stance and sent her longsword into a simple thrust.

Her attack was simple and unadorned… however, that did not make it any less deadly.

Because, even when two Transcendent champions fought, the fundamentals of combat still played a significant role in the outcome of the battle.

Speed, mass, force. Time, movement, and space.

In this instance, the fundamental principle that doomed Moonveil was rather obvious, something the importance of which most humans of the walking world learned as children.

It was the simple fact that Neph's sword was longer than her elegant saber.

And therefore…

Before Moonveil could behead Nephis with a decisive slash, the Kinslayer pierced her chest, penetrated her heart, snapped her spine, and exited from her back.

Blood spilled on the floor. The saber clattered as it fell.

The delicate woman stared at Nephis in disbelief, her beautiful eyes widening in horror.

'I won.'

Nephis had achieved her goal… however, she did not feel any joy or elation. All she felt was regret.

Because humanity had lost a powerful Saint — one of many that would die in this appalling, senseless war.

It was such a waste.

But then again, the battle wasn't over yet. She had no time to…

Pushing her mangled body as hard as she could, Nephis reeled back to avoid the Reflection's saber.

The creature moved past her, the sharp blade whistling past her neck. In the next moment, a small hand struck her in the chest, sending Nephis flying back — she hit the floor a couple dozen meters away and rolled awkwardly, her vision blurring momentarily from the terrible surge of pain.

By the time she staggered back to her feet, both Reflections were near Moonveil. One was holding her in its arms, while the other was standing between them and Nephis.

She pushed some air into her burning lungs.

'Now… what happens next depends on the nature of Moonveil's Aspect.'

Either the geas placed on her would disappear with Moonveil's death, unsealing her Aspect… or it would not.

If it was the former, she would be able to deal with the Reflections quite easily.

If it was the latter… things would turn really ugly.

However, in the next second, something unexpected happened… something Nephis had not anticipated, even though she should have.

Moonveil was dying, but her eyes regained their sharpness for a split second, piercing Nephis with a heavy gaze.

And then…

Nephis felt the seal binding her Aspect suddenly fall apart. Moonveil had released it.

At the same time, the Reflection holding the princess of Song in its hands shimmered slightly. And changed, assuming a new form.

Silver hair, fair skin, and calm grey eyes.

A face that could have been beautiful if it was expressive and lively instead of being cold and motionless like a lifeless mask.

A lithe and slender body.

It was her own face, and her own body.

The Reflection had mirrored Nephis.

She belatedly understood her mistake.

A moment later, a soft radiance enveloped the hands of the Reflection, pouring into Moonveil's body.

And Moonveil's terrible wounds miraculously healed.

…Nephis stared at her from a distance, feeling dismayed.

'What a cheat.'

The princess of Song was as good as new.

…Of course, now that Nephis had been given back her Aspect, her wounds were also healing, and a raging flame was rising in her soul.

For a moment, nobody moved. Moonveil was panting heavily, looking at Nephis with a hint of wariness.

Nephis, meanwhile…

Smiled a little.

'On the other hand… that works, as well.'

Moonveil and her two Reflections wore somber expressions as they readied themselves to continue the battle — which would grow infinitely more devastating and terrible now, without a doubt.

But Nephis was about to surprise them, as well.

She unleashed the suppressed power of her Aspect, assuming the incinerating form of the radiant spirit. At the same time, she called upon the sea of flames surrounding them, wrapping it around herself like a mantle.

However, she did not direct all that fiery power at her enemies.

…Instead, she aimed it at the wooden floor beneath her feet.

Surrounded by blinding light and a raging tide of immolating fire, Nephis fled from the battle and rushed down, piercing one level of the ancient Citadel after another like a falling star. Countless layers of mystical wood parted in front of her, crumbling into ash, as she burned a scorching path into the depths of the castle.

Lower and lower…

And lower still.

Until she plunged into a sea of impenetrable darkness, vanquishing it with her light.

Chapter-1901: Falling Sun

Sunny was in the throes of the familiar state of merciless clarity. He was fighting Revel in the ruins of the dark hall, pushing his body and mind to the absolute limits, each breath searing his lungs like acid.

The devastating fury of their clash made the world quake. Everything around them was enveloped by flowing darkness and suffocating smoke, the air suffused with sweltering heat.

Neither Sunny nor Revel were armed, using nothing but their bodies to destroy each other. The rolling echoes of their crushing blows were like deafening thunderclaps, and both moved at a speed far greater than what a mundane human would have been able to perceive.

The battle was fierce, fearsome, and chillingly ruthless. Its frenetic pace was daunting. Its violent brutality was appalling…

Sunny was having a tough time.

Devoid of the ability to call upon his Aspect, he could only rely on his physical might and combat technique to fight Revel. The problem, however, was that her Transcendent form was more than twice his height, with much longer arms and legs, which gave her a tremendous advantage in reach… and that was not even counting her one remaining wing.

Sunny's disadvantage was only confounded by the fact that he was witnessing the battle through Saint's eyes, not his own. He was more used to seeing himself from the third perspective than most people due to long years of perceiving the world through the shadows, but it was still a disorienting experience to fight while only relying on someone else's sight.

Revel had figured out that he was somehow relying on Saint to guide him almost instantly and made several attempts to destroy the

wounded Shadow. Sunny managed to block her from reaching Saint, but she methodically attacked him from positions where his own body blocked the living statue's view.

Worst of all, Lightslayer could still use her Aspect freely, which she did with great foresight and skill. At any moment, the beautiful demon could turn into a torrent of flowing darkness to escape, advance, circle around Sunny, or simply bypass his attack.

It was infuriating, reminding Sunny of the battle he had fought against Fiend in Falcon Scott. It felt as if he was fighting himself… which was not a pleasant feeling at all. Now that he was suffering at the hands of an enemy who possessed such an Ability, he learned painfully well just how much of a cheat his Shadow Step was.

He could not do anything against her Aspect Ability, but he could somewhat negate her advantage in size by manipulating his weight with the [Feather of Truth]. Sunny might have been smaller, but his mass was even greater than that of the towering demoness — as a result, his blows were especially devastating, and it was harder for her to throw him off balance.

His armor was shattered, and his body was hurting.

And yet…

So was hers.

Sunny was holding his ground while surrounded by true darkness, trading blow for blow with its Saint.

It was just that damned wing…

As Sunny blocked Revel's clawed hand, the obsidian talon stung his side, where the surface of the Onyx Mantle was already cracked. Feeling a pulse of sharp pain, he hissed and tried to grab the retreating wing — only to be sent stumbling back by a devastating kick.

A thin crack crossed the surface of his mask.

Worse still, Revel was already turning into a torrent of darkness,

rushing toward Saint…

'Damn it!'

Sunny ignored the pain and dashed forward to intercept her.

But at that moment…

He felt the entire Citadel shudder, and a thunderous boom resounded from far above, followed by another a moment later… and then another, and then another, almost without pause.

It was as if something was tearing through the ancient castle, travelling toward the ground at terrible speed.

Then, the heat permeating the air seemed to grow ten times more intense, and Sunny was confused for a moment.

'What is that?'

For a split second, he failed to recognize what was happening.

Then, he realized that he… he was actually seeing something with his own eyes.

Something was glowing in the darkness, high above him.

The ceiling of the vast hall had long collapsed, and even higher still, several orange spots seemed to have revealed themselves on the ceiling of the higher floor of the ancient castle, expanding as they grew.

Suddenly able to see again, Sunny froze for a short moment.

…In that short moment, the burning ceiling exploded with a deafening roar, and a blinding radiance blinded him all over again. It was as if the sun had risen in the middle of the Citadel — or rather, fell down from the sky.

Surrounded by a sea of flames, an incandescent being plummeted from the burning inferno above, crashing into the floor between Sunny and Revel and instantly setting it on fire.

Covering his eyes, he staggered back.

Revel's darkness was vanquished, and he could finally sense the shadows again. There was a white silhouette standing in the middle of the raging conflagration, so beautiful and pure that it seemed out of place in this dirty and imperfect world.

Sunny's lips twisted into a smile behind his cracked mask.

'Nephis…'

Nephis had arrived from whatever battle she had been fighting, practically bringing the entire Citadel down with her.

From the brief glimpse Sunny had got, it seemed as if every floor of the ancient castle above them was at least partially destroyed and set aflame. That certainly explained the smoke and the unbearable heat…

The radiant spirit of light slowly looked around, taking in the sight of the devastated hall. The broken walls, the hideous wounds littering Saint's body, Sunny's breached armor…

Finally, her gaze settled on the bloodied, but still breathtakingly beautiful figure of the creature of darkness staring at her with a grim expression.

Revel looked at Nephis, and then smiled coldly.

Her lips parted, and a single word escaped from her lips:

"...Crap."

Chapter-1902: Gruesome Affair

Revel's darkness was chased away and diminished, but it still swirled around her like a cloud. Shrouded by it, she looked at Nephis.

Nephis was looking at her, as well.

Suddenly, a melodious voice resounded in the ruined hall, containing both the ferocity of the scorching surface of the sun and the tranquillity of sunshine reflecting from clear water:

"...You are the Lightslayer?"

Revel remained silent for a heartbeat.

Her battered, bleeding body looked like a dirty mess in front of the pristine, radiant spirit of light.

"That's what they call me, yes."

Nephis remained silent for a few moments, then spoke in her usual even tone:

"I'm not impressed."

Her tone might have been emotionless, but that only made the remark sound more derisive.

It was as if she was saying… is that all? I am supposed to be slain by you?

Hearing that, Revel smiled darkly.

"I'm sorry for the disappointment, Lady Nephis."

With that, the ruined hall once again exploded with motion… the moment of peace was short-lived.

The scorching flames fell upon the princess of Song, as if possessing a life of their own. The radiant spirit seemed to turn into a streak of light, rushing at her with impossible speed.

Sunny was not far behind, either, knowing that this was their best chance to kill Revel.

Revel herself, meanwhile…

Took a step back and turned into a torrent of darkness.

The darkness did not attack, however. It did not try to defend itself, either — instead, it flowed down and seeped into the cracked floorboards, disappearing from view.

The flames only licked the ancient wood, scorching it. Neph's strike missed. Sunny emerged from the shadows a split second too late.

Revel had fled.

For a moment, he was face to face with Nephis, feeling her heat despite the incredible level of elemental resistance granted to him by the Onyx Mantle.

He was silent for a moment.

"...Are you okay?"

The spirit of light nodded, her graceful figure drowning in the blinding radiance.

"What about you?"

Sunny grinned behind the mask.

"I am alive, if that is what you mean."

With that, there was no time for conversations anymore. Because they both knew what Revel's retreat meant — she had fled downward, in the direction where the rest of their comrades were most likely fighting for their lives.

"Go! Destroy the corpse of the Terror at all costs!"

Sunny threw a brief glance at Saint, commanding her to stay safe, and stepped through the shadows once more.

A moment later, he emerged in the chaos of the vast hall where the Saints of the Sword Army had been ambushed by the daughters of Ki Song.

Just one look was enough to erase the smile from his face, replacing it with a somber expression.

'So many have died…'

The casualties suffered by the Sword Domain were appalling. He could only see four members of the conquest team still drawing breath — Roan, Helie, Jest, and the unfortunate Saint who had been wounded by Silent Stalker at the start of the fight.

Rivalen was nowhere to be seen, and the rest of the Saints were now corpses — some of them damaged too terribly to be of use for the Raven Queen, some still moving.

Silent Stalker was a bloody mess, barely clinging to life. Lonesome Howl and her one remaining Reflection were engaged in a fierce brawl with Fiend, protecting her fragile human body from him.

The corpse of the Great Terror, at least, seemed to have already been destroyed. Sunny did not know why Nephis had asked him to make getting rid of it a priority, but he was glad to know that the abominable creature did not pose any threat anymore.

Revel had just coalesced from the flowing darkness, standing at the opposite end of the hall from him. She had dismissed her Transcendent Form and looked like a human once again, her pale face smeared with blood.

Just as he caught sight of her, she shouted:

"Back!"

Immediately, the two great wolves leaped away. The Reflection

lingered for a moment before retreating to stall Fiend, while Lonesome Howl herself gently grabbed Silent Stalker in her teeth and dragged her toward Revel like a kitten.

Sunny shaped a mass of wild shadows into an odachi and prepared to defend the wounded Saints from the champions of Song.

"Fiend! Come here!"

The infernal troll looked at the retreating wolves with regret, and then stepped through the shadows to stand by Sunny's side.

The four surviving Saints were now behind them, looking relieved at the sight of the Lord of Shadows.

They were in a sorry state — even Sir Jest, who had escaped with relatively fewer wounds, was covered in blood.

In fact, the only person in the vast hall whose armor wasn't covered in blood was Sunny himself. That was because it was rather hard to make him bleed — however, to those who did not know about that peculiar trait of his, it looked as if he had escaped the dreadful battle against Dark Dancer Revel entirely unscathed.

His armor was breached and broken, though, making some of them question if there really was a human body underneath it.

Sunny, meanwhile, was given pause by Sir Jest's Transcendent form. Where had the amicable old man gone? Instead, a sinister abomination had taken his place, pure malice burning in its inhuman eyes. It had the body of a man and the legs of a goat, with two frightening horns growing from its disturbing, bestial head. The only word that could be used to describe it was… demonic.

Was he a satyr, or a literal fiend from the depths of hell?

Sunny suddenly felt a chill run down his spine.

…Across from them were Revel, Lonesome Howl, Silent Stalker, the Reflection, and the remaining undead Saints. The air seemed to crackle with tension, and none of the sides was in a hurry to make a move.

It was then that a violent explosion shook the hall, and Nephis arrived from above in a rain of burning debris.

At the same time… it felt as if Sunny's vision was blurred for a moment.

Suddenly, a delicate beauty with white hair and shimmering eyes — Moonveil — appeared near Revel, her face pale and smeared in blood. Accompanying her…

He blinked.

Accompanying the beautiful princess was a Reflection of Nephis. The creature looked like her, and had the same presence as her… and yet, Sunny found the copy lacking.

There was simply no way to mistake it for the real Changing Star, even if one was blind.

The appearance of the Reflection answered Sunny's recent question, though, making him scowl behind the mask.

'No wonder.'

Now that he saw the copy of Nephis, he knew why she had told him to destroy the corpse of the Great Terror as fast as possible. Considering that the Reflection was able to mirror her, it could not be a mere Beast.

Nephis had already reformed the soul core she had detonated to escape from the Cursed Tyrant, Condemnation, and was a Transcendent Titan once again — therefore, the Reflection had to be a Titan, as well. Either a Transcendent one… or even Supreme.

Sunny's eyes widened a little.

'That bastard…'

If the Great Terror remained whole, the damn creature might have been able to mirror it, instead. Then, they would have had to contend against that abomination in addition to the daughters of Ki Song.

Sadly, Sunny could only see the reflection of Neph's mirrored soul cores, and with the mess of various potent auras clashing in the dark hall, he could not measure the power of the Reflection accurately… it might have been hiding its power, as well.

'Can it really be Supreme?'

What the hell could Mordret have done to nurture a Supreme Titan? How would he have even created one, considering that each Reflection demanded a sacrifice of as many soul cores as a creature of its Class was meant to possess?

He had so many questions, and none of the possible answers promised anything good for the future.

As Nephis softly landed on the ground, an eerie silence settled in the darkness of the devastated hall.

A moment later, however, the darkness was chased away by soft light.

The wounds on the bodies of Roan, Helie, and the Saint slumped on Helie's back shone with white radiance and began to heal with startling speed.

Almost at the same time, the Reflection of Nephis laid its hands on Revel and Silent Stalker, healing them in turn.

'Great.'

Sunny sighed.

It was an incredible boon, to have a healer on one's side.

However, if the enemy had access to a healer as well, an already terrible battle could become a truly gruesome affair.

That was precisely what seemed to be happening right now.

Chapter-1903: Wide Sleeves

For a few moments, neither side moved.

The Saints of the Sword Army had almost recovered from their wounds — all except Sir Jest, curiously enough. Sunny couldn't help but notice that Nephis was able to heal the rest from a distance, but that did not include the old man.

On the other side, Revel and Silent Stalker were also close to being healed. At the same time, something that Sunny had assumed was a severely damaged statue of a fearsome gargoyle moved, revealing itself to be a living creature.

'...The Saint of Sorrow.'

Even though they were enemies in this battle, Sunny was a little glad that Tamar's father had survived.

For now, at least.

Even though those who had been wounded most severely were now saved from the clutches of death by pure white flames, both sides were still in a sorry state. Most of them were exhausted, mentally shaken, and wary. More importantly, almost every participant of the battle had expended great amounts of essence in the furious fight.

Funnily enough, Sunny was an exception, since he had been prevented from calling upon his Aspect in the clash against Revel. In addition to that, he barely used any Memories — those put a strain on one's essence, as well, especially with soul arsenals as powerful as those Saints usually possessed. The more powerful a Memory was, the more essence its enchantments consumed.

Unlike the rest of the fighters, Sunny was fresh and could go on fighting with the same level of intensity for a long while.

Nephis seemed flush with essence, as well — he did not know what she had faced prior to descending from above in a storm of flames, but it did not seem like she had used her Aspect extensively. Apart from that, she was a Transcendent Titan — her pool of essence was seven times more voluminous than that of other Saints, to begin with. Her lineage enhanced it even further.

So, both of the most powerful champions on the side of the Sword Domain were in a good shape… which could not be said about the daughters of Ki Song.

Honestly, things weren't looking good for them.

They had started the battle in a supremely advantageous position — not only had they had the element of surprise on their side, immediately eliminating several opponents, but they had also been able to isolate and suppress the leaders of the conquest force.

Now, however, these advantages were gone. Worse than that, several of Mordret's Reflections had already been destroyed. The corpse of the Great Terror was also gone, and it would not be easy to counter Sunny's powers next to Nephis. Revel's own power was being suppressed now.

'We should be able to decimate them.'

Unless Lightslayer had more trump cards hidden up her sleeve, he did not see a way for her to salvage the situation.

Judging by her somber expression, Revel had come to the same conclusion.

She looked up, at the burning ceiling of the vast hall and the vertical inferno left by Neph's descent from the upper floors of the garden temple.

Then, Revel lowered her gaze and looked directly at Nephis.

"...Have you not come to conquer this Citadel for the King of Swords, Changing Star?"

Nephis lingered with the answer for a few moments.

"So I have."

Lightslayer smiled coldly.

"Quite an interesting strategy, to unleash your flames in the heart of a wooden Citadel. If I did not know better, I would have assumed that your aim is to destroy it instead."

Sunny had to admit that there was some truth to her words. Smoke was already drifting into the vast hall from above, and the fire was spreading. The ancient castle had already sustained heavy damage from the furious forces unleashed by the clash of so many Saints — in fact, it was a miracle that it was still standing.

Sunny remembered the first Transcendent battle he had witnessed. Back then, just two Saints — Tyris and Cormac — had destroyed an entire island in their clash.

The people who had left behind this beautiful stronghold were truly remarkable builders, it seemed.

Nephis considered Revel's words for a moment or two. Then, her radiance dimmed, and she dismissed her Transformation, turning back into a human. Miraculously… this time, her armor had survived.

However, Sunny gritted his teeth when he saw it.

There were no wounds on the body, but her blackened armor was terribly shredded, pierced in at least a dozen places, and on the verge of collapsing into a whirlwind of sparks.

She had suffered greatly in the battle against Moonveil, it seemed.

His eyes flashed with murderous cold behind the cracked mask.

'...I'll kill them slowly.'

Whatever fatigue Sunny had felt disappeared, replaced by deadly intent.

Standing beside him, Nephis stared at Revel impassively.

"If it means denying the Citadel to the Song Domain… I just might go ahead and destroy it. Why not?"

A corner of her mouth curled upward slightly, and she added evenly:

"Of course, I'll make sure to destroy you first."

Revel's expression turned grim.

She hesitated for a few moments, then uttered through gritted teeth:

"You can try. You might even live long enough to enjoy the outcome. But what about your companions? Will they survive?"

Sunny frowned, not sure why she was saying these things.

Was Revel, perhaps, trying to negotiate a peaceful resolution instead of continuing the bloody battle?

If so, she was extremely naive. There was no way that Nephis would surrender her claim on this Citadel — she would indeed rather burn it to the ground, if that was the only choice. Which it wasn't, since the remains of the conquest force were poised to achieve victory.

But Revel was definitely not naive, so…

'She's buying time.'

Sunny cursed mentally and prepared to lunge forward.

But it was already late.

By that time, Moonveil had already finished whatever it was she had been secretly doing.

She raised her hands and brought them together, forming a triangle with her thumbs and index fingers.

A split second later, a drop of vibrant crimson blood suddenly materialized in the middle of the triangle…

And Sunny's senses screamed at him that he was in dire danger.

As it turned out, Revel did, in fact, have another trump card up her sleeve.

Chapter-1904: Queen's Blood

There was very little time to react, and even less time to comprehend what was happening.

However, Sunny still managed to recognize the drop of dark blood, and guess what it represented.

He had seen something similar once, a long time ago.

Back then, he and a group of survivors of the Battle of the Black Skull had been desperately trying to escape from the Skinwalker, lost in the white dunes of the Nightmare Desert. Sadly, the vessels of the Great abomination still managed to catch up with them.

Some of the survivors chose to split up, but most stayed together. It was then that Morgan summoned a swarm of flying swords — now, Sunny knew that those were swords forged by her father.

Seishan, meanwhile, had summoned a drop of blood almost identical to the one hovering in the air between Moonveil's fingers right now.

Sunny had been running for his life, so he did not see what the eerie drop of blood actually accomplished. He just remembered a strange feeling of awe, and that the entire world was momentarily painted in shades of red when its vast and terrifying power was unleashed.

He could make a conjecture, though.

Considering that Anvil had bestowed the swords — conduits of his power — to Morgan before sending her to Antarctica, wasn't it reasonable to assume that Ki Song had bestowed something to her daughter, as well?

If so, then the drop of blood was a vessel of a Sovereign's power.

…Which did not mean anything good for Sunny, Nephis, and the rest of the Saints of the Sword Domain.

'Damn it!'

It was already too late by the time Sunny realized that Revel was scheming something.

The crimson drop swirled in the air…

And then exploded into a tidal wave of red light.

Sunny stumbled back, momentarily dazed by a crushing force of tyrannical presence. It was as if a cold, penetrating gaze of someone's vast and unfathomably powerful conscience brushed past him, making his very soul shiver in fear.

The flood of crimson light rushed at them like a raging wave of blood, submerging the world in a red radiance. He tried to raise a wall of shadows in its path, but the ethereal light simply passed through it… a moment later, the wall crumbled, the shadows forming it destroyed.

Neph's figure ignited with a blinding radiance of her own. Her pure light seemed to hold the blood tide back for a few moments, but was then overpowered and painted red.

Sunny steeled himself, knowing that he would have to withstand the power of a Sovereign a heartbeat later.

Just before the wave of ethereal blood reached them, though…

A ghostly visage of interlocking shields shimmered in the air around the remnants of the conquest force, enveloping them like a dome. The flood of crimson light collided with it and parted, flowing past them on both sides.

Looking back, Sunny saw the sorry figure of Saint Rivalen of Aegis Rose slumping against the wall near the gates of the Citadel.

'The insufferable fool is alive, after all...'

He allowed himself to feel relieved for a short moment, then turned his attention back to the dire situation.

From what Sunny could remember, the power Seishan had unleashed in the Nightmare Desert receded after a few moments. But then again, she had been a mere Master back then — perhaps a Saint would be able to channel the power of a Supreme better.

He took a step closer to Nephis and commanded Fiend to move forward, shielding the group from the rush of red light.

Sadly, Sunny was right — a few moments passed, and then a few more. The bloody radiance drowning the world did not dim.

The force field created by Rivalen, however, seemed to be weakening.

The ghostly shields had become invisible after manifesting for a second, but Sunny could practically hear them bending under the pressure, ready to succumb to it.

The shield wall protecting them from the power of Ki Song was slowly becoming covered by a net of cracks. Or maybe it was rusting, slowly dissolving into red dust.

'At best, I can escape by using Shadow Step.'

He could take Nephis with him. Maybe Roan, as well… but Sunny had never carried several Transcendent beings with him through the shadows. He wasn't sure that he would be able to save the rest.

Meaning that he would have to leave at least some of the Saints of the Sword Army behind. Who would he abandon? Jest? Rivalen? Helie?

…Luckily, in the end, he did not have to make that choice.

Eventually, after a dozen seconds or so, the red radiance enveloping the world finally dimmed. It dissipated slowly, and then disappeared altogether.

The vast hall was plunged into dim darkness once again, illuminated

by the orange glow of the burning ceiling and the light of several luminous Memories.

Sunny's eyes widened.

The hall... was empty.

As Rivalen slumped on the floor and the other Saints drew hoarse breaths, he looked around and then extended his shadow sense outward.

He did not sense anything.

Revel and her sisters were gone. So were the Saint of Sorrow and the Reflections. Even the Transcendent corpses reanimated by the authority of Queen Song were nowhere to be seen.

They have fled.

The battle was over, ending just as unexpectedly as it had started.

Sunny let out a sigh.

He did not even know what kind of a sigh it was — was it a sigh of relief, or a sigh of disappointment?

In any case, now that the battle was finished...

They had to deal with its consequences before thinking about anything else.

"They're gone."

Nephis did not respond immediately, looking up, at the sea of flames raging above them. Her expression was somber.

Sunny lingered for a moment.

"Can you put the fires out?"

She shook her head slowly.

"Perhaps. But the Citadel is already damaged too severely… it's on

the verge of breaking apart. By the time I suppress all the flames, it would have collapsed already."

Sir Jest assumed his human form — thankfully — wiped the blood off his face, and said in a wry tone:

"Suffering a fire in the middle of a lake… inside a dried up bone. How ironic."

He looked around, as if searching for something, then asked:

"So, what do we do, my lady?"

Nephis walked over to where Rivalen was laying on the floor and kneeled beside him, placing her hands on his bloodied body.

"...It doesn't matter if the Citadel collapses. We just need to preserve the Gateway. As long as the Gateway survives, the stronghold can be rebuilt around it."

That was true.

Of course, it depended entirely on how the Spell had fashioned this particular Gateway. There were some that existed in and of itself, like the altar of the Sanctuary of Noctis. However, there were also some that drew power from the structure around them, like the Gateway in the Crimson Spire.

They had no choice but to try, though. Otherwise, the entire expedition would be a complete failure.

Grimacing as a soft white radiance enveloped her hands, Nephis looked at Sunny and said:

"We must locate the Gateway first."

He nodded, and then stepped into the shadows to go find it.

In truth, Sunny did not care that much about Anvil claiming another Citadel in Godgrave. Now that the battle was over, his mind was preoccupied by other issues.

Namely, all the revelations he had achieved while fighting Lightslayer, and all the boons he had received…

Chapter-1905: Pyrrhic Victory

As it turned out, the Citadel had several spacious underground levels. That only made sense, considering that the lake surrounding it was transient — it swelled when the Hollows were flooded and drained once the water flowed through the ribs of the dead deity into its titanic spine.

So, those levels were only situated below the ground level when the lake was full. Most of the time, they would actually be above the water, and so, there was another grand entrance situated lower than the vast hall where the ambush had taken place.

Sunny found the Gateway beneath a crystal dome situated not far from that entrance.

He remained still for a few moments, bewildered by what he saw and felt there.

There was a small grove growing behind the transparent walls of the dome. The walls were enveloped by scarlet vines from outside — however, there were perfectly normal plants growing inside.

Emerald grass, ancient oaks, soft moss, and beautiful flowers blooming on the meadow hidden at the heart of the grove, where a small pond of pristine water stood still in the tranquil darkness.

These were the first plants that had not been twisted by Corruption that Sunny found in Godgrave — in all of Dream Realm, perhaps, apart from those brought here by the inhabitants of the waking world.

More than that, he sensed something as he entered the crystal dome. A pure and unmistakable feeling of sacredness permeated the air here, as if the taint consuming the rest of this cursed region had never managed to find its way inside the crystal dome.

'The pond is the Gateway.'

Sunny glanced at the calm water, realizing that he could not determine how deep it was. Then, he turned away with a shrug and stepped through the shadows back to where he had left Nephis and the other Saints.

Soon, all of them sought refuge in the grove.

The Citadel above them was burning and falling apart. Its walls were resilient enough to repel the incinerating flames summoned by Nephis… at least for a while. However, the castle had become overgrown by the scarlet infestation over the ages — the vines and trees piercing its structure were like kindling, helping the fire spread and destroy the ancient walls.

It would reach these lower levels soon, as well. However, Nephis could protect at least one floor from being consumed by flames.

The bloodied Saints sat silently on the grass, too tired and rattled to talk. Only Sir Jest seemed to be in a pleasant mood, but even he was keeping his mouth shut, concentrating on cleaning the cane he had picked up from the floor before leaving the ground level.

One of them had to erase Revel's imprint on the Citadel and replace it with their own. However, six of the seven surviving Saints already controlled a Citadel of their own — doing so would relinquish their authority over it. The person most suited for the job was the Saint who had been wounded in the ambush, but he was currently unconscious.

There were a few things they could do, but after discussing it shortly, the Saints of the Sword Army had decided to simply wait for a while.

…Of course, Sunny could have taken the Citadel too. After all, he had seven incarnations and could place seven tethers instead of one — but that was not something he wanted the King of Swords to know. So, he just sat down and stared into the distance.

There was a lot for him to think about.

The battle… technically, they had won it. They had repelled the

ambush and conquered the Citadel — the Gateway, at least — thus fulfilling the goal of the expedition force. Soon, the authority of the King of Swords would spread to central Godgrave, and his Domain would stretch all the way from the Clavicle Plain to the Breastbone Reach.

Even if Seishan and her Seventh Legion managed to take the Citadel in the west, the Song Domain would still possess fewer Citadels, control less territory, and be pressed to reach deeper into the Hollows from their remote stronghold.

The Sword Army had achieved a victory today.

However… it was a Pyrrhic victory.

Sunny sighed.

Revel might have chosen to retreat, but that was in part due to the fact that withdrawing was still a good outcome for the forces of Song. Yes, they had lost the Citadel — but in the process, their enemy had suffered a debilitating loss, as well.

Seven Saints of the Sword Domain were dead.

Silent Stalker had reaped more lives than anyone else, killing three Transcendent champions of the Sword Army. Lonesome Howl and her Reflections were just behind her, with two kills between the three of them. Moonveil had killed one, and the last fallen Saint was brought down by the risen dead… Revel did not kill anyone herself, but she had orchestrated the entire battle.

In exchange, the Song Army only lost three of Mordret's Reflections. Their destruction was not an insignificant loss, but it was not comparable to the casualties suffered by Neph's team.

The Sword Army had already been at a disadvantage due to having fewer Saints in its ranks. With the loss of these seven champions, the gap in the number of Transcendents between Valor and Song was bound to become a dire influence on all future battles.

So, none of the factual victors was in a good mood.

Hidden behind the mask, Sunny threw a secretive glance at Nephis.

She had already finished healing Sir Jest. Sunny's own wounds had been tended to, as well. Now, she was sitting on the shore of the pond, looking at the water with her usual detached expression.

She was in a tough situation.

As the commander of the expedition, Nephis was responsible for the deaths of her people — each and every loss must have weighed heavy on her soul. Sunny knew all too well the agony of failing those who had entrusted their lives to you… many soldiers had perished to help them reach the Citadel, and now, seven Saints were dead — each a singular talent and a trusted comrade.

Nephis had more experience of being a leader than he had, and she had ordered many more people to their deaths. However, one never grew accustomed to such things… well, actually, maybe that statement was wrong. Anvil and Ki Song seemed to have built quite a tolerance to sacrificing human lives for their goals, and there should have been plenty of others like them.

But Nephis had not. So, she was most likely hurting right now.

On the other hand… while she was leading these warriors, she was also plotting against their king. In a sense, she was an outsider among them — a traitor, even. She only cared about who ended up in control of the Citadel as far as needing the two Sovereigns to weaken each other was concerned.

It must have been a difficult situation to navigate, both morally and emotionally.

Added to that was the fact that her capacity for emotions and morality — for humanity itself — was currently somewhat washed away by the immolating flames of her Aspect.

Sunny wanted to talk to her, but they could hardly exchange an honest word while surrounded by the rest of the Saints.

After a while, the members of the conquest party regained some level of composure, or maybe simply grew bored with silence. They started

to talk, sharing the information about the battle with each other.

Sunny listened for a while, learning about what Moonveil and Lonesome Howl were capable of. He briefly shared his own experience fighting Revel, as well, which earned him a heavy look from Nephis.

After that, he couldn't wait anymore. The fire was already spreading to this floor, and the world had quaked terribly some time ago, signifying that the upper levels of the Citadel collapsed. Since Nephis was going to be busy preventing the flames from damaging the crystal dome, Sunny announced that he would check the situation above and dissolved into shadows.

He was going to check on Saint.

Chapter-1906: Dark Armor

A moment later, he emerged from the darkness on the great pyre of burning rubble. The garden temple had indeed crumbled, consumed by a blazing inferno. The mountain of debris was still aflame, and the heat was so scorching that a mundane human would have been reduced to ash in an instant.

Even a Saint could have been burned to death or smothered inside the billowing cloud of black smoke. However, Sunny was more or less fine due to the Onyx Mantle — it might not have been comfortable, but he could explore the burning ruins freely.

It did not take him much time to find Saint. She was quite conspicuous — out there amidst the blazing debris, there was an area consumed by impenetrable darkness, its confines silent and tranquil.

His Shadow was inside. He couldn't quite see her, of course, but felt her presence, as well as that of his shadows.

Sunny hesitated at the edge of the sphere of true darkness for a few moments.

'...That's new.'

Saint had carried a bit of elemental darkness within her heart, true. But she had never been able to summon it in this manner — she could only use it to manifest a weapon or coat a Memory.

It seemed that killing the Reflection had filled the reservoir of the Heart of Darkness to the brim, allowing her powers to evolve. From the look of it, Saint had gained an Ability similar to what Revel was capable of — now, she could cover an entire area with her darkness. The area was not quite as vast as that of Revel, but that did not matter.

Sunny smiled.

What mattered was the synergy between this power and Saint's [Mantle of Darkness] Ability.

'When surrounded by darkness, and true darkness more so, her swiftness and might will increase. Her wounds will be healed…'

Now that Saint could freely unleash elemental darkness, she could be surrounded by it at all times. Which meant that she would almost always be able to receive the full boon of the [Mantle of Darkness].

There was more to it, as well.

Although Sunny was not sure how to help Saint evolve, he felt that this new power of hers… could very well be the first step to becoming a Tyrant. After all, Tyrants were beings who exerted their authority on the world — much like the Sovereigns did, albeit in a different manner.

Most Tyrants controlled either a territory or an army of minions, usually both at the same time. And being able to drown an area in elemental darkness was very close to gaining control over it.

'Isn't it?'

Sunny walked forward and at the same time took control of one of the incarnations wrapped around Saint's body — otherwise, he would have been blinded by his own Shadow's power, which would be quite embarrassing.

Now that he was not consumed by the urgency of battle, Sunny felt stunned by how strange and miraculous the feeling of fusing with another creature was all over again.

He was dazed for a few moments, taking in the complex, alien sensation of being one with Saint's body. He also felt relieved, noticing that her terrible wounds were healing — she had spent all that time nestled in the embrace of her own summoned darkness, after all, being nourished and nurtured by it.

Then, a loud sound distracted him.

It was the sound of a battered onyx breastplate being dropped on the ground.

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

Then, he blinked a few more times.

'No, wait. What?!'

Saint… seemed to be removing her armor.

There was no mistake. He was looking at the world through her eyes, after all — the graceful stone knight was standing in the darkness, methodically taking off her shattered armor. She was already all but free of it, with only a few pieces remaining.

Sunny had caught glimpses of Saint's face and skin before, but he had never seen her out of the intricate suit of fearsome armor. It was quite a shock.

Saint was wearing simple garments beneath the onyx plate, much like any knight would. Her figure was alluringly flawless, fitting her inhumanly beautiful face. Her skin was the same color as the onyx armor, making it seem as if she was made of stone… however, she was not.

Although Saint's body looked like it was cut from stone and had many properties of stone, it was merely stonelike. Now that Sunny could sense it, he realized more clearly than ever that she was a being of flesh and blood… well, at least of flesh and dust.

And seeing her like this, Sunny couldn't help but remember the beautiful statue of Storm God he had seen in the shrine of the Ebony Tower once.

It was quite clear who Nether had used as inspiration when creating the Stone Saints, at least in terms of appearance.

Saint, meanwhile, spared him an indifferent look and continued removing her armor.

Her greaves and vambraces fell to the ground, leaving her entirely

defenseless.

Sunny remembered that he had not come here to stare just then.

'But why is she taking off the armor instead of restoring it?'

His answer came a moment later.

Saint knelt beside the broken armor and stared at it for a while.

It almost seemed… as if there was a hint of an unknown, somber emotion in her ruby eyes.

Then, she raised a hand and brought her fist down.

The adamantine onyx shattered like glass…

And was then absorbed into her body, just like the Memories she used to consume had been before.

Suddenly, the crimson flames burning in her eyes grew deeper, and Saint seemed to become stronger.

Standing up with a prideful expression, she straightened her back.

A moment later, her beautiful figure was enveloped by flowing darkness, and that darkness…

Solidified, encasing the body of the taciturn Shadow in an impenetrable carapace of intricate onyx armor. Pristine and new.

Sunny remained motionless.

'...I'll be damned.'

Saint had just manifested her own Onyx Mantle, it seemed.

Chapter-1907: Negative Quality

After donning her new armor, Saint turned slightly and gazed at Sunny with her usual indifference. He would have loved to study the design of the onyx suit — it was not every day one saw an armor forged of pure darkness, after all — but sadly, he couldn't.

That was because Sunny only saw the world through Saint's eyes, and she was looking at him, not herself.

'How frustrating.'

This must have been what Cassie felt when conversing with someone in private. The confusion was only made worse by the fact that Sunny did not only share Saint's vision — he shared all of her senses, just like Cassie shared all the senses of those marked by her Ascended Ability.

Of course, it was much easier for him to get accustomed to such a strange way of perceiving the world, since he had already been sharing his consciousness across many incarnations. The quantity of perspectives was not a problem for Sunny… it was just that their quality dazed him.

His avatars were identical copies of his own body, after all, while Saint was very different from him. At least he was already used to her stonelike nature after years spent together…

Or so he had thought.

As it turned out, his Shadow was not done surprising him today. The ability to summon a pool of elemental darkness and manifest a suit of armor was not the full extent of what she had gained by slaying Revel's Reflection.

There was some distance between Sunny and Saint, still. The debris

was charred and highly unstable, making it hard for her to move — after all, she was close to three meters in height and weighed a literal ton. A few of them, actually. So, the debris could very well fail to support her weight.

Which was why Saint did not walk. Instead, she simply turned into a torrent of darkness and traveled all the way to where Sunny was standing in a heartbeat.

It was not quite as instantaneous as moving between shadows with Shadow Step, but still quite fast. The sensation of becoming a stream of darkness was also very different from what Sunny usually felt when traveling through shadows — in many ways that he found hard to describe, but mainly because of how… hollow it felt, to be one with the darkness.

He did not feel embraced by the flow of elemental darkness. Instead, it was a cold and unfathomable thing, too alien and indifferent to be welcoming. Even being a part of it, Sunny felt nothing but profound solitude.

A moment later, Saint was towering above him, standing only a few meters of scorched wooden debris away.

The ground shook precariously, and the blackened wood creaked, as if ready to crumble into embers and ash.

'Uh-oh.'

Of course, neither Saint nor Sunny would be seriously hurt if they fell beneath the upper layer of the wreckage. They would not be burned in the infernal depths of the smoldering ruin, either.

Still, he would have liked to avoid becoming smeared from head to toe in soot…

Before Sunny could do anything, though, something about Saint changed subtly.

And then, not so subtly.

He opened his eyes wide.

'Did she just…'

She had. Saint had effortlessly changed the weight of her stonelike body, making it as light as a feather.

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'Feather of Truth?'

It was the same ability he possessed, granted by the Onyx Shell. Saint had not been able to adjust her mass while wearing her original armor, but now that it had become a part of her personal darkness, she could.

The effect was more or less the same, but the process was different.

Sunny had only vaguely felt it, but it was as if she had not simply changed her mass… instead, it was as if a negative quality was added to it, thus reducing the weight. Where had that negativity come from? He did not know.

Then again, he did not know how the [Feather of Truth] worked, either. Perhaps he had always done the same thing without realizing it.

In any case, Sunny was quite pleased with the fact that Saint could change her weight at will now. Naturally, an ability like that was an incredible boon in combat — he had woven it so deeply into his own battle art that fighting any other way seemed clumsy and ineffectual now.

However, it was also quite useful outside of combat, since Saint's great weight often presented a problem in mundane situations. Like walking on fragile floors, traveling by boat… or swimming.

Considering how often Sunny found himself inexplicably thrown into large bodies of water, that alone was an invaluable boon.

Saint stared at him from above for a bit.

Then, she stared at him some more.

Her gaze was cold and indifferent, like always…

However, this time, Sunny had a completely different reaction to it.

He shifted from one leg to another, trying not to take offense.

'No, but… am I really this tiny?!'

Since he was looking through Saint's eyes right now, he was staring at himself from her great height. From that perspective, Sunny indeed looked like a little toy.

Was that how Saint always saw him?

He ground his teeth, missing the days when she was a mere Monster, and of the same height as him.

Fiend had started out as a scrawny gremlin, as well… but now, that gluttonous idiot was five meters tall.

Sunny did not even want to imagine what he looked like from Fiend's perspective…

'He might be huge, but he's still an annoying imp inside! In fact, I should start calling him Imp again, just so that the overgrown bastard does not get a big head!'

Saint, meanwhile, tilted her head a little.

Then… he felt her body turning into a torrent of darkness once again.

But it did not rush anywhere. Instead, it shrank in size and then solidified back into the figure of the graceful knight. Only now, she was smaller.

Suddenly, Sunny was looking at himself from a new perspective… one level with his own eyes.

'Huh?'

He remained motionless for a moment.

'Huh!'

So Saint had not just gained the ability to reduce her weight. She had also gained the ability to reduce her size, and used it to return to her original modest stature…

Which was great news for Sunny!

Simply wonderful news...

He smiled behind the mask.

"That's much better."

But as soon as he was done talking, Saint raised her chin slightly, and changed her size once more.

This time, she made it so that she was a full head taller than Sunny.

He froze.

Nodding with a hint of satisfaction, Saint looked down at him, and then headed away.

Sunny remained motionless, absolutely dumbfounded by the outrageous sequence of events.

He only managed to regain his composure a few seconds later.

'What the hell? Where is she even going? There's nowhere to go!'

Chapter-1908: Contemplating Mortality

Eventually, Sunny dismissed Saint to let her continue her recovery in the dark silence of his soul. Able to see once again, he looked around and pondered what he had learned.

Saint seemed to have gained several new powers. One was to summon a pool of elemental darkness, one was to turn into a torrent of it, one was to manifest a suit of armor, and the last two had to do with reducing her weight and size.

However, Sunny was not sure if these were truly new Attributes and Abilities, or simply evolutions of those she had already possessed. The suit of armor forged from pure darkness, for example, was a logical extension of her [Blade of Darkness] Ability. The power to summon a flood of elemental darkness might have been simply the result of her [Heart of Darkness] growing stronger.

Sunny was not sure. More than that, he did not even know if these new powers Saint had shown him were the full extent of her change. Neither did he know how many shadow fragments she had received after absorbing her old suit of onyx armor.

She definitely seemed… stronger. Her presence had grown deeper, the cold crimson flames burning in her eyes had become fiercer... even though Saint had not evolved to a new Class, it felt as if she was much closer to becoming a Tyrant now.

The problem was that Sunny had no way of knowing the details of what had changed about her.

His [Handy Bracelet] imitated the shimmering runes, but what they read came from Sunny's own head, not the omniscient reservoir of knowledge that the Spell possessed.

So, there was only one way for him to fully understand Saint's new powers — it was to ask Cassie to take a good look at her.

However…

Doing that was a problem in and of itself.

That was because Sunny had been unable to contact Cassie from the moment Revel and her sisters ambushed the Saints of the Sword Domain — or maybe even from before that, since he had not spoken to her for some time prior to the ambush.

As soon as Sunny discovered that he could not hear Cassie, his incarnation in the warcamp of the Sword Army had been searching for her. But Master Sunless did not manage to find the blind seer yet.

Looking at the subterranean lake through the smoke, Sunny sighed.

'I wonder what she's up to.'

The smoke was irritating, so Sunny turned into a shadow and glided to the edges of the smoldering ruin, where the air was cleaner.

Taking a deep breath, he looked at the water.

The dim darkness of the Hollows was illuminated by the orange glow of the towering pyre, and dancing flames reflected on the surface of the lake. It was quiet and pretty — a soothing scene after the violent fury of the recent battle.

Looking at it, Sunny felt that an emotion he had been suppressing ever since the daughters of Ki Song retreated finally broke free.

A tide of dark, terrifying fury escaped from its cage and flooded his heart.

'...Black Moon.'

Princess Moonveil, or whatever her name was... had almost killed Nephis today. While Sunny was having fun learning new things and testing his limits against Revel, Neph had been bleeding somewhere far above, alone and robbed of her powers.

He couldn't quite make sense of it all.

Nephis was… Nephis. Her public image was that of a larger-than-life heroine, and although Sunny knew that it had been meticulously crafted by the government and Cassie, he still couldn't help but forget that she was a mere mortal, sometimes.

She had accomplished the impossible too many times — just like he had — and had overcome impossible odds on too many occasions. In addition to that, her Aspect made her nearly immortal.

So, Sunny did not often contemplate the possibility that Nephis would be killed. Even when imagining how he himself would fight someone with powers similar to hers, he never thought about slaying them — that would be just a senseless waste of time and energy.

Instead, he carefully considered how he would restrain the opponent and render them helpless, which was the optimal way of defeating such a foe.

But today, that subconscious bias of his had been shattered. Each Aspect was unique, and there were all kinds of them out there… even such an insidious power as the ability to nullify all other powers existed, wielded by one of the princesses of the Song Domain.

And Moonveil had used that power of hers against Nephis.

Sunny did not even know how close he had come to losing her, and he… was not alright with that fact.

His hands turned into fists without him noticing.

For a moment, Sunny contemplated using his incarnation in the camp of the Song Army to go on a slaughter. He was currently not too far from Seishan and Death Singer — maybe killing them would be enough punishment for Clan Song, who had dared to lay a hand on Nephis.

If not, it could at least make him feel better.

However, he quickly discarded that idea. Not only would it put Rain in danger, but he couldn't really kill Saints for personal reasons.

Perhaps playing a Valor soldier had gotten into his head, a little — for a moment, Sunny forgot that the Great Clan Song was not his enemy.

Its Queen was, as well as the King of Swords. Everyone else was a precious resource that could not be wasted — with every Saint that perished in the senseless war between the two Domains, the future of humanity was being compromised. Every powerful Awakened that died in Godgrave would not be able to save countless lives in the dire, inevitable future.

Sunny let out a frustrated sigh.

Most of all, that impulse of his was childish.

He was letting his emotions get the best of him. He was being foolish.

Of course, Nephis could die. No matter how impossible it seemed, she could be killed just like the rest of them. He had always understood that logically, but understanding and acceptance were two different things.

Sunny could be killed despite his miraculous tenacity, as well. Or worse, captured alive — remembering the dark mirror cell where Mordret had been kept for many years made him shudder. That was not something he wished for himself…

Or for Nephis.

Just as he thought about her, the weak flames around him were suddenly extinguished, and she emerged from the smoke, shielding her face with a hand.

"There you are."

Sunny studied her for a while, as if making sure that she was really alive, and then smiled faintly behind the mask.

"Yes. Here I am."

Chapter-1909: Feel Alive

Nephis walked over to the edge of the water, looked at it for a few moments, and then sat on the ground.

Her voice sounded a little raspy, but mostly just as it always did:

"He has regained consciousness and is binding the Gateway now. Revel's imprint is strong, so it will take some time… ten minutes, at least. Maybe half an hour."

She sighed.

"Some of us will have to return to the waking world after that, to bring back the initial reinforcements. You know what happens next."

Sunny did know.

Once the Gateway was bound by a Saint of the Sword Army, Anvil's Domain would manifest in the Hollows. The King of Swords would probably arrive at the ruined Citadel himself, and the war would finally spill beneath the surface of the ancient bones.

The subjugation of the Hollows was bound to be an affair both spectacular and harrowing. Considering how powerful the predators of the ancient jungle were, the king would have to lead the conquest personally… at least for a while.

By the time the immediate area around the lake was conquered by the Sword Army, both sides would have prominently established themselves in Godgrave. The first stage of the war would be complete, and the two armies would start clashing in large-scale battles, clamoring for control.

Control over the surface, control over the Hollows, control over the paths to the remaining two Citadels.

Everything that had happened before was merely a prelude, and the true bloodshed would begin now.

Well… there were ten more minutes before that happened, at least.

Nephis sighed and looked down, at her blackened, shredded armor. Then, she dismissed it and summoned a soft white tunic instead.

Her voice sounded a little gloomy:

"You know… I think I am going to give up on wearing armor altogether. What is the point, if it only ends up being destroyed? Or worse, a burden. Especially these suits of full plate that Knights of Valor prefer — in the last battle, the left elbow joint was bent almost immediately. I had to struggle every time I needed to bend my arm."

A faint smile appeared on her face.

"I think it will be great… less burden, more mobility, wider field of view. Not to mention the heat — everyone still cooking inside a steel armor will be green with envy, looking at my well-ventilated self."

Sunny gave her a long stare, not at all happy at the thought of people staring at Neph's... well-ventilated... body.

And unhappy for another reason, too.

"If it wasn't for your armor, it would have been your arm being cut instead of an elbow joint being bent."

Nephis shrugged nonchalantly.

"I can heal my arm. I can't repair a broken piece of armor."

He frowned.

"Only, this time, you couldn't."

She did not respond, looking at the water with a hint of wistfulness in her gaze. After a while, Sunny sighed. The facade of arrogant coldness the Lord of Shadows usually wore slipped a little, and he said in a more humane tone:

"It must have been hard, fighting against an overwhelming enemy without your powers. I had my Shadows with me, at least. You were alone."

Nephis lingered for a few moments, then slowly shook her head.

"...Actually, it was nice."

Her gaze grew distant.

"I almost forgot, what it felt like — to hold a sword without the promise of pain. I loved swordsmanship once, you know? That is because... I don't have many memories of my father, and in those that I do, he is teaching me how to hold a sword. So, even after he was gone, training made me feel a connection to him."

She looked at the water.

"But I don't love it anymore. Wielding a sword has become simply something that I do, because it is one of the tools at my disposal… the sharpest of them, perhaps. In fact, I don't know if there's anything left that I love."

Sunny remained silent, but his face fell a little behind the mask.

'Ouch.'

He knew that Neph's feelings for him were more shallow than his feelings for her were — after all, from her perspective, they had only known each other for a few months. But it still wasn't very pleasant, to hear his supposed girlfriend say something like that.

Oblivious to his bitterness, Nephis sighed.

"Sometimes I wonder what my grandmother would have thought if she saw me now. Would she have been proud? Or heartbroken? Is this what she wanted for me? Probably not... I doubt it."

Sunny sat beside her, then turned and looked at her through the dark chasms of his mask's eyes.

His voice sounded a little hesitant:

"From what I know… she would have been happy that you are alive. She would say — good job staying alive, my dear. Well, or something like that. In any case, you are your own person. Your grandmother could not know the burden you carry and the scars that remain on your heart. She could not understand the choices you make, or why you make them.

No one is better qualified to know these things than you are, so no one has the right to critique your decisions. Don't worry about it."

Gods knew, the same held true for Sunny. Both of his parents had been menial workers — he doubted that they would have had a lot of insight into the life of a Saint, let alone one as exceptional as Sunny was. Their mundane lives had been far away from the matters of gods, daemons, Supreme tyrants, and world-ending wars.

But they would have been happy to know that both he and Rain were alive and healthy. That they were forging their own path in life, despite how hard and unforgiving the world was. That they had not been bent and misshapen by its cold cruelty.

Nephis looked at him, remained silent for a few moments, and said evenly:

"...Your mask has a crack in it."

Sunny blinked.

'Right.'

It had cracked during the battle against Revel. The enchantments still functioned, but with Anvil potentially arriving in a matter of minutes, it was better to dismiss [Definitely Not Me] and don the real deal.

He sighed and dismissed the damaged Memory, summoning Weaver's Mask instead.

…However, soon after the first mask dissolved into nothingness and before the second one manifested itself into reality, Nephis suddenly placed a hand on the back of Sunny's neck, pulled him closer, and kissed him.

He froze for a moment, then hurriedly dismissed the manifesting Divine Memory and responded to her passionate kiss.

The softness of her lips, the heat of her skin… were intoxicating.

They quenched a thirst that he had not known he was suffering from, and at the same time ignited a fire within him that was much more scorching than the flames devouring the ruins of the fallen Citadel around them.

Dazed and enraptured, Sunny quietly cursed the Onyx Mantle for preventing him from feeling the warm, supple fullness of her embrace.

Their fervent kiss lasted for a long time.

Nephis only drew away when both of them were on the verge of running out of air. Breathing heavily, they remained silent for a few moments.

Sunny touched his lips, blinked a couple of times, then asked in an unexpectedly shy tone:

"What… what was that for?"

She turned away with a slight smile and shrugged.

"Just… I thought I would die, for a few moments back there. So, I suddenly wanted to feel alive."

He remained silent for a bit.

"So, do you feel alive now?"

Nephis considered his question seriously, then looked at him with a solemn expression.

"I'd say… I'm about halfway revived?"

His eyes glistened.

…Before too long, both of them felt an imperceptible shift in the air.

It was as if an invisible, but palpable presence settled over the area, changing it subtly — at the same time, irrevocably. Making it colder, sharper, and heavier with solid intent.

The Sword Domain had descended into the Hollows.

Chapter-1910: Rivergate

Rivergate, the Citadel of Clan Dagonet, was built on a wide river. It cut across it like a great wall — or rather, a series of walls, descending from tall cliffs like steps meant for a giant.

It was both a dam and a lock. The highest wall held back the powerful current. Each step below it was separated by a vast chamber with towering gates, which could be filled with or drained of water with the help of ancient enchantments.

A ship traveling to or from the Stormsea could descend from the cliffs or scale them due to the ancient system of locks, never leaving the river. At the same time, nothing could swim further upstream without destroying the Citadel — and even then, the assailant would have to crawl out of the water and travel by land with the locks destroyed.

There was almost a kilometer of vertical distance between the highest point of Rivergate and its lowest point. Each descending wall was incredibly tall and thick, built of monolithic stone, with battlements constructed on top of it. Fearsome siege weapons stood on the battlements — some of them enchanted with ancient sorcery, some built by the forgemasters of Clan Valor.

Hundreds of Awakened crowded the walls, led by a dozen Masters.

Seven Saints were standing on the highest of the fortress walls, looking down with somber expressions.

They were Morgan, the Princess of War, and six champions whose help she had enlisted… or coerced.

At this point, there was little difference.

Three of the six Saints had belonged to the House of Night once —

Saint Naeve, Saint Bloodwave, and Saint Aether.

The other three were with the government — Nightsinger, War Beast, and Soul Reaper Jet.

At that moment, Naeve was talking to War Beast — Saint Athena, Raised by Wolves.

"...So you encountered that fiend before?"

She gave him a long look, then smiled wryly.

"We even killed him before."

Naeve turned to a startlingly beautiful man with auburn hair and mesmerizing green eyes, a stunned expression on his face.

"Saint Nightingale, is this true?"

Saint Kai shifted uncomfortably.

"Not exactly. What we killed was not that fiend — rather, it was a Corrupted version of his Transcendent self conjured by the Nightmare. Even then, none of us three dare claim any credit. He was eradicated by Lady Changing Star."

He sighed.

"Still. We know more about what he's capable of than anyone else. That should be of some help."

Naeve looked down, then cast a dark gaze south.

"...At least we know that he can be killed, then."

Less than a day had passed since Mordret of… of Nowhere, really, had landed on the shore of the Sword Domain. The six Saints Morgan had recruited barely had any time to talk while being brought to Rivergate by her.

The journey from Bastion to here had been swift due to the fact that there were three Transcendent champions of the House of Night with

them. Morgan herself had not said much to them, spending most of the journey thinking about her task with a dark expression on her face.

She had, however, given each of the Six Saints an amulet in the shape of an anvil pierced by a sword — all except Nightingale, who already possessed one.

Her expression had been solemn while entrusting her companions with the steel charms.

"At the moment, there are only seven of these in existence. Now, six of them are here — I spoiled quite a few relationships to take them away from the previous owners. So, treasure them well. Never part with the amulet, and don't allow that man to take it away from you. Unless you want to become one of his vessels."

Saint Naeve studied the amulet with a mournful expression. After a while, he asked:

"...Don't you have one for yourself, Lady Morgan?"

She shook her head.

"The seventh… had been lost in Antarctica and never recovered. My uncle wore it. Of course, Clan Valor possesses other means of defense against that man, but none are quite as easily transportable. In any case, don't worry. I'll be fine."

Hearing her words, Soul Reaper raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? How so?"

Morgan answered her with a sharp smile.

"Well, if he does enter my soul… I'll just have to kill him there, won't I? Like my dear sister did, in the Nightmare."

She had been preparing to fight her brother again for four years. Morgan doubted that he would actually dare challenge her to a soul duel, but if he did… both of them would not survive the battle, this time.

Morgan almost hoped that he would.

In fact, the amulets were a bad solution to their predicament. That was because, from everything her family had learned about that man, the only way to kill him was to destroy his true reflection during a soul duel… even that had only been learned from Changing Star's report on the events of her Third Nightmare.

So, by donning the amulets, her champions were rejecting the only method of defeating the enemy.

But little could be done about that. Leaving them defenseless was too great of a risk — she absolutely could not allow her brother to take more Saints, because he would be able to conquer more Citadels by wearing their bodies.

And losing more Citadels to the Song Domain was not an option.

She sighed.

"How long before he comes?"

It was Saint Bloodwave, with his deep voice, who had asked the question.

Morgan lingered for a moment.

"He has already come. He's just hiding and observing us, for the time being."

Her words seemed to unsettle the six Saints — or rather, five of them. Soul Reaper remained relaxed and aloof, leaning on her ghostly war scythe as she lazily studied the ancient walls of Rivergate.

Raised by Wolves shifted from one leg to another, and then looked at Morgan with a smile.

"You know what they usually do in such situations in heroic novels, don't you?"

Morgan couldn't help but admit… that she was continuously perplexed by that woman.

She blinked a couple of times, trying to remember if she had even read a heroic novel in her life.

Surely not.

"Can't say that I do, Saint Athena."

The tall woman — beautiful as a statue of the goddess of war that had come alive — grinned.

"Well, the resourceful type of hero always blows up a dam and drowns an army of ten thousand men, achieving an impossible victory and proving their strategic genius. You're the strategist, so… we aren't going to blow up Rivergate, are we? Oh, and call me Effie."

Morgan stared at her for a few moments, then slowly shook her head.

"No, we are not going to blow up Rivergate. Why would I try drowning an enemy whose vessels are all Saints from the House of Night? That doesn't make any sense."

Raised by Wolves… Effie… nodded knowingly.

"A good decision. You really are a genius!"

Chapter-1911: Untamed Chaos

Morgan gazed at the ancient fortress below her. The Knights of Valor and the warriors of the Dagonet clan were preparing for battle — they had protected the river for decades, not letting a single abomination from the Stormsea reach the Mirror Lake.

Of course, the best of them were in Godgrave now… and the guest who had come from the sea this time was a much more dreadful creature than the abominable dwellers of the depths.

She winced.

The river passed the series of great locks and flowed south, disappearing beyond the horizon. The Stormsea was somewhere out there, as well, a few days away.

In truth, Morgan did not need to destroy Rivergate…

Because it was already doomed.

The warriors crowding the walls of the fortress did not know it, and the six Saints she had recruited did not know it either. But in truth, there was no way to stop her brother here. He would destroy Rivergate himself — everything except for the Gateway — and unleash the caged river, washing away all signs of the destructive battle.

The warriors would die. The civilians living in the young city that had grown upstream of Rivergate would most likely become collateral damage in the Transcendent clash.

Morgan's goal here was not to save the ancestral home of clan Dagonet, but to get a measure of the enemy's strength, and hopefully destroy a couple of his Transcendent vessels.

Still, still…

Fighting a losing battle did not feel pleasant.

Morgan had inherited the lineage of War God, and so, she was often called the Princess of War. She had been fighting against Nightmare Creatures since before she was an Awakened — in fact, Morgan had barely finished middle school when she was sent into an arena to face a Dormant Beast for the first time.

Her First Nightmare had been a ruthless one, and she had undergone the trial of the winter solstice like any ordinary Sleeper would. As an Awakened, she led countless warriors into battles to protect the lands controlled by her father, as well as various cities in the waking world.

She had conquered the Second Nightmare without losing a single member of her cohort, and excelled in every duty entrusted to her as a Master...

Until Antarctica.

In the four years since, Morgan's renown had only grown. She had challenged the Third Nightmare alone, attained Transcendence, and took her rightful place as the general of the Valor army.

Changing Star might have shone brighter on the battlefield, but it was Morgan who governed the powerful war machine of the Sword Domain, making sure that the blossoming kingdom suffered no setbacks.

Today, many people called her a genius strategist…

Of course, most of those people had no idea about what that word really meant.

In truth, there was no strategy to a war of Awakened.

There was only chaos.

On a battlefield where Saints and Devils fought, chaos reigned supreme. There were too many strange Aspects, too many bizarre powers, too many inconceivable variables. Most lessons taught by the

history of warfare went out of the window, leaving only mayhem and carnage in their wake.

So, the only thing a strategist could do was rein in the chaos, tame it, and make it serve their goals.

…Take Rivergate, for example.

It was a mighty fortress — one that should have been nearly impregnable for any enemy coming from the south.

But what did it matter if the enemy possessed the Ability to connect two reflections through his small, personal Mirror Realm and travel between them, bringing his army along?

The warriors on the walls were preparing to repel an attack from the south, the siege weapons were aimed downstream, and even Morgan herself was looking there. But her brother could easily attack from the north, taking the city behind the fortress hostage first.

In fact, he could just bypass Rivergate entirely and go directly to Bastion.

Only he wouldn't.

Because Morgan was here, taming the chaos.

Mordret's goal was Bastion, but he did not know what traps his father and Clan Valor had set up for him there. So, he would not attack it recklessly — conquering the Great Citadel was a time-consuming affair.

And if he left Morgan behind to advance north…

She would simply go south and take the Night Garden, instead.

That was also the reason why Mordret could not spread his vessels thin and attack the cities of the Sword Domain situated further inland — not only would he have to surrender the Citadels of the Stormsea to place new tethers, but the former Great Citadel of the House of Night would be left defenseless.

…Of course, Morgan was sure that her brother actually wanted her to attack Night Garden. Otherwise, he wouldn't have run it ashore, turning it into an almost irresistible bait. Who knew what kind of trap he had prepared for her there?

After all, Mordret — that thing pretending to be her brother — was an heir of War, as well, no matter how much her father wanted to deny it.

Mordret knew how to tame chaos, too.

Between the two of them, the one who could do it better would survive, and the other one would die.

'Funny.'

Morgan smiled, enjoying the warm breeze.

She did not really have memories of her brother from early childhood. He had already been gone by the time she grew old enough to remember anything. Morgan's mother had died giving birth to her, and her father was a distant presence at best — he was more of a teacher than a parent, full of demanding expectation, but devoid of warmth.

She was mostly raised by the elders of Clan Valor. But there was a distance between her and the members of branch families, as well as the children from the vassal clans. Growing up, the closest thing she had to friends her age were the daughters of Ki Song… who were now her enemies, funnily enough.

Still, it had not been an unhappy childhood.

…Until the brother she did not remember returned.

Morgan had been ten or eleven when he showed up in Bastion, having already conquered the First Nightmare. She was happy at first, but then… then, she quickly learned that there was something wrong about the eerie boy who called himself Mordret.

Mordret had taught her what fear was, all the way back then.

And now, standing on the wall of Rivergate, Morgan felt it again.

She hated to admit it, but she was a little afraid.

An amused smile appeared on her face.

'How refreshing.'

It was such a nostalgic emotion. She had not felt it in a long, long while.

Turning to her six Transcendent companions, Morgan lingered for a moment, and then said:

"What are you waiting for? Get to business."

Nightingale gave her a confused look.

…Even his confusion looked elegant and dashing.

He was so annoying.

"What business?"

Morgan raised an eyebrow.

"What do you mean? Command the soldiers to retreat, get them off the walls, start evacuating the city. Put everyone on boats and send them up the river, to Bastion."

Rivergate might have been doomed, but that did not mean that everyone here had to die or become a hostage to the Prince of Nothing. Even though there was some strategic value in using the garrison as cannon fodder to stall his vessels, Morgan decided to forego the most rational path this one time.

She shook her head.

"Stop staring and start moving. Go! I want the city to be empty by evening…"

Chapter-1912: Self-Reflection

It wasn't easy to evacuate an entire city in the span of a day, even if it was many times smaller than Bastion. Luckily, Morgan had Nightingale with her — with his commanding voice, everything went smoothly and swiftly.

The warriors defending the fortress were reluctant to leave their post, but they did not dare to disobey her. The members of the Dagonet clan were even more reluctant to abandon their Citadel without a battle, but Morgan persuaded them without too much trouble. They were mostly non-combatants, anyway — the true strength of the clan was far north, fighting in Godgrave.

The rest knew that they would be of no real help in the clash against the banished prince of Valor.

By the time the sun started to roll toward the horizon, Rivergate had grown eerily quiet. Now, only the seven Saints remained in the ancient fortress, calmly preparing for battle. The Saints from the House of Night were grim and full of murderous desire for vengeance… the three government Saints were strangely nonchalant.

Or maybe not so strangely. Two of them were survivors of the Forgotten Shore, after all, while the third was Soul Reaper Jet — Morgan wasn't even sure if it was possible for them to lose composure.

'Like Nephis.'

Morgan briefly contemplated destroying the Gateway of Rivergate, but then discarded that idea. It would not mean much for the war, anyway — not in the long run, at least. The infrastructure of the Sword Domain would suffer greatly, though, and it would be hard to rebuild after the war was over.

If there would be anyone left to rebuild, that was.

"Death! Death!"

Morgan stared at the annoying crow that seemed to always follow Soul Reaper around with displeasure.

She scowled slightly.

"What are you saying, stupid bird?"

The crow stared back at her, then fluttered its wings in the air.

"Bird! Bird!"

Morgan sighed and shook her head. What was she doing talking to an Echo?

Finally, their preparations were complete. She threw one last glance at the river, which shone beautifully in the radiance of a blazing sunset, and took a canteen of water off her belt.

Opening the lid, Morgan took a sip of water, then poured the rest on the paved surface of the rampart.

For a moment, she could see her reflection in the puddle, surrounded by the reflections of the six Saints.

Then, her reflection smiled.

And spoke.

"...It has been awhile, my dear sister."

None of the Saints reeled back, but those of them from the House of Night visibly paled… even Saint Aether, who used to be the ideal of composure and decorum in the past, seemed unnerved.

Morgan nodded somberly, not paying the young man any attention.

"Indeed. The last time I saw you… was it when you failed to kill me and ran away to save your sorry skin? And right after giving the big speech about how uncompromising your desire to see me dead was,

no less. That must have been quite embarrassing for you."

Her reflection laughed.

"Ah… what a sweet memory! You floundering in the dirt, too weak to stand up… I truly cherish it a lot."

Morgan gritted her teeth, the familiar feeling of shame cutting her like a blade.

Mordret had taught her what shame was, as well.

Her reflection, meanwhile, pretended to look around.

"I see you've evacuated the town. How very unlike you, my dear sister. I would have rather expected you to string every man and woman living there on the fortress walls, to serve as padding. That would be more in line with our family's style, wouldn't it?"

The reflection smiled pleasantly.

"...Of course, nothing is stopping me from going after the boats first, and then returning here to finish you off."

Morgan met his smile with one of her own.

"Funny you should mention boats. Tell me, did you crash the Night Garden into the shore because of some devious plan, or simply because you couldn't properly control it?"

At that moment, Soul Reaper sighed.

"Are you really just going to trade insults?"

Morgan's reflection shifted its gaze to the three government Saints. Its smile suddenly brightened.

"Saint Jet, Saint Kai, Saint Athena… it warms my heart to see you again, my old comrades. Naeve, Bloodwave, and Aether too. I cherish the memories of conquering Nightmares and battling the Stormsea side by side with you all, as well."

Saint Naeve stared at the reflection coldly, then uttered through gritted teeth:

"You vile creature…"

The reflection remained silent for a few moments, its smile slowly draining away. Eventually, it stared at them with an eerie, inhuman expression.

Seeing her own face wearing it was a little disturbing, even for Morgan.

The reflection spoke once again, this time not bothering to put on a human mask:

"I am going to say it once. The six of you… have nothing to do with this. This is between me and the Great Clan Valor — a family affair, if you will. So, I'll give you a chance to escape. Surrender the fortress and leave. Then, I will spare your lives."

Saint Naeve looked at the reflection darkly.

"It is indeed a family affair. Our family, which you slaughtered!"

Soul Reaper Jet, meanwhile, just shrugged nonchalantly.

"It would be really inconvenient for me if you conquer Bastion. So… sorry. We'll stay."

Her crow chose that solemn moment to caw loudly:

"Sorry! Sorry!"

Morgan glanced at the stupid bird, shook her head, and looked back at her reflection.

"It must be getting really crowded in your head, huh? Did you really think they would take you up on that offer?"

The reflection remained motionless for a few moments, then suddenly smiled.

"Not really. But I had to ask for the sake of politeness. Now that that is out of the way…"

Its smile turned bleak and eerie.

"...Prepare to die, I guess. Ah, I have really waited for this moment for a long, long time."

A moment later, the wall under their feet trembled slightly.

And at the same time, the water of the river far downstream churned, revealing several gargantuan shapes.

Morgan looked at the sunset and took a long, deep breath.

Scarlet sparks danced around her head, forming into a black helmet.

"Prepare for battle."

And just like that, the battle for Rivergate began.

Chapter-1913: Devastation

The battle for Rivergate began at sunset.

…By the time the sun rose from behind the horizon once more, the ancient fortress was gone.

The towering gates of the great locks were bent, broken, and torn off their hinges. The impregnable walls had crumbled. The enchanted siege weapons had been reduced to dust.

The river, which had been held back by the immense dam for thousands of years, had broken free and rushed toward the distant sea.

The devastating flood had demolished the smoldering ruins and washed away the traces of the dreadful battle. The artificial lake around which the city had been built dried up, revealing its muddy slopes. The basin of the river below the cliffs, on the contrary, was flooded.

The entire landscape of the region had been devastated and reshaped, becoming almost unrecognizable. A great waterfall roared as it plummeted from the tall cliffs, while the stronghold of Clan Dagonet was no more.

'...What a pity.'

Morgan looked at the ruins of Rivergate with a wistful expression.

With the loss of the ancient stronghold, the Sword Domain would grow a little weaker, while the Song Domain would grow a little stronger. But that was not the reason for her regret.

The real reason was that Bastion had lost its connection to the sea. Even if Godgrave was conquered by humans, it would never be a safe

place — so, no matter which side won the war in the end, the Stormsea would become the connection between the two parts of the great human kingdom in the Dream Realm.

Without Rivergate, it would be much more difficult to establish trade routes to and from Bastion. And trade was the true engine of civilization.

'...Why am I even thinking about this?'

Morgan tiredly dismissed her helmet and spat out a torrent of blood.

The helmet had caved in by a devastating blow, and so had the right side of her face. She could feel the sharp edges of her shattered teeth cut into her tongue and the inside of her torn cheek… an unpleasant sensation, no doubt, but far from the worst of what she was feeling right now.

Mordret had been like a calamity, descending upon them in all his cold, inhuman fury. They had managed to give him a good fight — quite an excellent one, really — but at the end of the day, it was all for naught. They stood no chance against him.

So, Morgan had commanded her six subordinates to retreat, and stayed back to stall the enemy for a little while.

She was starting to regret that decision a bit, now.

"You don't look so well, my dear sister."

Her brother's insidious voice was not mocking or full of dark glee, but rather cold and indifferent. Strangely enough, that only made it sound more frightening.

Morgan looked at herself quietly.

'It's true…'

Her armor had been breached and broken. Her body was terribly mutilated, and one of her arms was practically severed… a commendable accomplishment, really, considering how tough and durable her flesh was. Blood was flowing from countless wounds,

painting the shattered stones beneath her into vibrant shades of scarlet — the same color as her strange eyes.

Her bloody lips twisted into a grin.

"Really? I think red is my color, though."

Mordret simply stared at her, probably trying to guess what her next move would be.

His own body did not bear many wounds, because he had used the Transcendent vessels to shield it. The stolen bodies of the Saints of Night were worse for wear — especially those who had fought Raised by Wolves — but sadly, none had been destroyed. His soul had not been damaged too severely, either, despite having faced Soul Reaper Jet.

Mordret knew just how dangerous she was, so he had made sure to suppress her in particular during the battle.

All of them had fought valiantly, but none managed to stop his terrifying assault.

Naeve and Bloodwave had battled their former clansmen in the depths of the river, two against four, making it boil. Nightingale alone had engaged four more vessels of the Prince of Nothing attacking from upstream.

Raised by Wolves had plunged into the water and almost tore the most powerful of the leviathans, a terrifying kraken, apart — and that was after wounding many by bombarding them with gargantuan javelins from high above. Aether had defended the walls, while Soul Reaper had played a deadly game of cat and mouse with four of Mordret's vessels in the south.

Morgan herself had engaged the true body of the mirror wraith.

…Hence her current sorry appearance.

She took a hoarse breath.

"I'll give it to you… brother. You are indeed great and terrible. To

think that you have been able to obliterate an entire Great Clan… not only that, but you have even become no different from a Great Clan yourself. What a weird sentence to say... oh, but in any case, it is quite an amazing feat, for a single individual to change the entire flow of the war through his personal achievements."

She spat more blood, straightened slightly, and added in a neutral tone:

"But you know what?"

Mordret raised an eyebrow and remained silent. After a few moments, he shook his head.

"I am a little disappointed. I really expected more from you, sister."

Morgan smiled.

"What? Do you really think that this is it? Surely, no. No… you and I, we are only just starting."

With that, she pierced him with a sharp gaze, and called upon one of the enchantments stored deep within her body.

Instantly, her essence flowed like a tide, washing over her body and seeping deep into its every cell.

Morgan's smile swiftly turned less lopsided. Her caved face regained its previous shape, the deep cuts marring her flawless skin closing as if they had never existed. Her broken teeth were restored to their previous pristine condition.

The countless wounds on her mangled body healed, while her arm, which was hanging by a thread, was pulled back by ropes of growing muscle, and was then attached back to where it belonged.

In just a few moments, Morgan was restored to perfect health, her body brimming with energy and overflowing with soul essence. It was as if she had not endured a grueling battle against her brother at all.

She moved a hand, and a deep cut split the stones between her and

one of Mordret's vessels, almost severing its head.

Standing some distance away, Mordret scowled.

"...Now where did you find a healing enchantment as powerful as that?"

Morgan simply smiled.

"I guess you might say that I saw it in a Nightmare."

Chapter-1914: Floodgates Open

Morgan raised her sword and pointed it at the man who called himself her brother.

"...I've collected a few other enchantments in preparation for meeting you one day, brother. Would you like to see?"

Slowly, a dangerous light ignited in his mirror-like eyes, and his thin lips twisted into a cold smile.

"Sure, why not? Ah… I do wonder how long your essence will last. If I cut off both of your arms this time, would you have to spend more? No, actually, I think I'll take your eyes. I remember losing one to your blade once, so it will only be fair."

Morgan pierced him with a burning gaze, wishing that she could destroy this monster here and now.

Then, she gritted her teeth and called upon another enchantment.

There were all kinds of Memories in the world, and Morgan's Ascended Ability allowed her to assimilate their enchantments into her body. There were limits to that power, of course, and a price that had to be paid for using it.

However, it granted her a unique level of versatility, made her supremely unpredictable in battle, and most of all, granted her great power.

If she wished so and had enough time to prepare, she could fly like Nightingale, become a colossus like Raised by Wolves, cut souls like Soul Reaper Jet, command darkness like the Lord of Shadows… even unleash incinerating flames like Changing Star.

Sadly, nothing of what she could do — at least currently — could

allow her to defeat her monstrous brother and his thirteen Transcendent vessels alone.

So, she did not try.

Her goal at Rivergate had been accomplished, anyway.

The enchantment she called upon was powerful, but simple — it allowed her to travel across great distances in an instant, as long as she had established an anchor point in advance.

Morgan had placed an enchanted anchor on the shore of the river while traveling to Rivergate from Bastion, and now, it was as if she was being pulled back to it by a force overwhelming enough to pierce space itself.

As Mordret and his vessels readied themselves to repel Morgan's trump-card attack…

She simply vanished into thin air, leaving no trace behind.

Mordret froze for a moment, staring at where his sister had been a split second ago in disbelief. His gaze became unfocused for a moment, traveling across the myriad reflections in the vast area around Rivergate.

Morgan was nowhere to be found.

Suddenly, a wry chuckle escaped from his lips, and he threw an amused look north.

His eyes glistened with dark, mad killing intent.

"...I'll see you in Bastion, then."

***

A moment later, Morgan found herself on the shore of the river, flying through the air at terrible speed. She hit the ground roughly and rolled several times, smashing a couple of boulders into dust with her steel body. Eventually, she came to a halt in a cloud of dust, just a few meters from the edge of the water.

It was a less than graceful entrance, to say the least.

Grimacing in annoyance, she flipped onto her back and slowly sat up.

The desolate ruins of Rivergate were gone, replaced by the picturesque view of the Sword Domain's heartland. The clear water of the river glistened in the golden light of dawn, and ancient trees swayed in the light breeze, their emerald leaves rustling like a sea.

Of course, there were all kinds of horrors hiding beneath the surface of the water, and the tall trees could pull you under the ground with their roots to serve as nourishment for the rustling leaves. The Dream Realm could often be beautiful, but it was never kind.

Today, however, everything was peaceful and quiet, as if the river and the forest were afraid to make a sound.

And for a good reason.

There was a majestic dragon laying on the shore of the river, his midnight-blue scales almost turning black in the sunlight. A woman with icy-blue eyes was leaning on his side, emanating a feeling of chilling cold. Another woman, this one seemingly cast of polished steel, was gnawing on a bone of a slain abomination near a fire nearby.

Two great shadows were hiding under the water, and a young man in a suit of damaged armor was sitting on the shore, staring into the water with a bleak expression.

As she appeared, everyone turned in her direction.

They were battered and bloodied, but alive.

The young man was the first one to speak:

"Lady Morgan! You… you have survived."

She spared him a short glance, then turned away.

"...It's quite insulting to see you acting so surprised, Lord Aether. Of course, I did."

Morgan couldn't help but treat the young man coldly.

Aether used to be one of the most promising young Saints of the House of Night… when it still existed. He was strong, talented, valiant, and excellent in all regards. In fact, back when Clan Valor had been in talks with the House of Night to forge an alliance through marriage, it was Saint Aether who was supposed to become her fiancé.

The negotiations had fallen through, of course, and although Morgan knew that it was for a political reason… she couldn't help but feel personally slighted by the man. Which was ironic, honestly, considering that she had not really wanted negotiations to succeed, feeling ambivalent about the whole affair.

Still…

'Look who crawled back to beg me for help after rejecting me so firmly…'

Of course, she did not let these childish thoughts show on her face.

At that moment, the surface of the water broke, and the head of an enormous sea serpent rose above the water, looking at her with two giant indigo eyes.

Saint Naeve assumed his human form and walked onto the shore, looking slightly worse for wear after the tough battle.

He gave her a bow.

"Lady Morgan."

The older Nightwalker hesitated for a few moments, and then shook his head.

"It is good that you are unharmed. However, the enemy… I simply can't understand how an individual can be that strong. What kind of monster has your clan created?"

She gave him a bleak look.

"First of all… it wasn't us who created him. If anything, my clan had been protecting the world from that thing for many years. Secondly — he is that strong because he is the first human in history of our world who has attained a Divine Aspect. Yes, those do exist. But actually… we are in luck."

Naeve scowled.

"You call that luck?"

Morgan let out a tired sigh and smiled at him.

Unlike Aether, she quite liked Saint Naeve. That was because she had met his daughter briefly while arranging for the survivors of the House of Night to be taken care of, and the little girl was positively sweet.

"Indeed. Because what you have witnessed at Rivergate is merely half of that monster's strength. He did not even bring out his Reflections… given the circumstances, we might very well assume that he is unable to do so at the moment, for whatever reason. So, yes. Count yourself lucky."

The dragon raised its head and looked at her, which made Morgan shiver.

A moment later, a deep, melodious voice resounded in her ears:

"We lost Rivergate. What now?"

Morgan hesitated for a few moments.

She could evacuate the modest town that had grown around the Citadel of House Dagonet, but there were tens of millions of people living in Bastion. They would not be able to flee anywhere when the war came knocking on their door.

Of course…

Bastion was not just any Citadel, but a Great one. It had a power of its own, and if she used that power well, the outcome of her battle against Mordret would be…

Less set in stone than it seemed, at the moment.

Rising to her feet, Morgan shrugged.

"Now, we rush back to Bastion and prepare for a siege."

A pale smile twisted her bloodied lips.

"If I can have my way, that siege is going to be a long one…"

Chapter-1915: Broken Balance

A hideous abomination lunged at a screaming soldier, only to have an arrow pierce its eye and tumble to the ground. As the massive beast rolled in the red moss, another was already climbing over its dead body.

"Grab him!"

Rain took a shaky step back, nocking another arrow on the string. As she strained her muscles to draw the Beast of Prey, two Awakened warriors of the Seventh Legion dashed forward, grabbed the soldier, and dragged him back toward the crumbling phalanx.

The man was missing both legs and bleeding profusely, his screams drowning in the horrid cacophony of the battle. He was going to bleed to death shortly — if not for Fleur, that was, whose Aspect allowed her to stem bleeding and hasten healing.

The dying soldier was thrown to the ground behind the loose line of the melee vanguard, and she immediately fell to her knees next to him, reaching with both bloodied hands to treat his terrible wounds.

The delicate young woman had lost her usual sweet bearance and luster, looking grim and haggard. Her beautiful silk robe was painted red by blood, and her red hair was soaked with sweat. She gritted her teeth, which made her fair face look even paler.

Rain did not have time to see if her friend was doing alright. She barely managed to take aim before letting go of the string, then stumbled another step back.

All around them, the expedition force of the Song Army was drowning in a seemingly endless tide of abominations. There was no end to them, and the hideous corpses kept piling, forming a morbid rampart around the stubbornly resisting human legions.

That rampart of bleeding flesh, at least, slowed the Nightmare Creatures down.

The scale of the battle was inconceivable. There were countless Awakened warriors, more than a thousand Masters, and three dozen Saints battling the frenzied hordes of Nightmare Creatures under the blinding radiance of the cloudy sky.

The ground was quaking, the air was permeated by an unbearable stench of blood, and the abominable jungle was burning all around them, black pillars of smoke rising above the chaotic battlefield.

Tamar and Ray were just ahead, holding back the flood of Nightmare Creatures as part of the first line. Rain was using her enchanted bow and stunning archery skill to support them, while Fleur played the role of the field medic.

The situation was dire.

The expedition force led by Lady Seishan had made it all the way across the Collarbone Plain, reaching the great fissure that led to the vicinity of the supposed Citadel. The march had been a feverish nightmare of gruesome battles and appalling bloodshed, but they had arrived at their destination with relative ease.

The jungle had been pushed back and burned, its inhabitants had been obliterated. A chain of fortified forts had been raised along the way, encircling lesser cracks in the bone plain, their garrisons tasked with holding back the scarlet infestation.

The soldiers were growing used to the deathly threat posed by the sky, so fewer and fewer of them lost their lives when the veil of clouds parted. The Transcendent champions of the Song Domain were learning how to deal with the scarlet infestation better, as well.

The great fissure was now behind them, vast like a valley, with scarlet tendrils protruding from it akin to bulging hills. The dreadful Hollows were far below, teeming with ancient horrors and Nightmare Creatures so fierce that even Saints were not safe from their fangs and claws…

The plan had been for the army to camp near the edge of the fissure while the elite conquest force went into the dim darkness of the Hollows to conquer the Citadel. Sadly, there had been a wrinkle in that plan.

That was because a terrifyingly vast and inexplicable horde of Nightmare Creatures suddenly emerged from the jungle and rushed at the expedition force like a tidal wave, threatening to swallow the entire army.

No one knew where the abominations had come from in such great numbers and why. However, in hindsight, their appearance was only logical — Godgrave was not just a place, after all, but also an eerie and bizarre ecosystem. Everything here was connected.

When the Sword Army initiated its conquest of the Collarbone Plain from the east, they had destroyed and incinerated vast swathes of the scarlet jungle. Their advance disturbed the balance of the ecosystem, driving countless Nightmare Creatures west — which, in turn, displaced even more abominations, forming a terrible stampede of monsters.

The army led by Lady Seishan was now under threat of being buried under that monstrous avalanche.

The cause and timing of it all were so deadly and unfortunate for the warriors of Song that Rain couldn't help but think that the person in charge of the Sword Army had somehow known that this would happen, and caused it deliberately. How devious did one have to be to use absolute chaos to their advantage?

In any case, the Song Army was now surrounded, with their backs pressed against the edge of the great fissure, with nowhere to retreat and no choice but to fight.

Which was what they had been doing for many hours, killing countless abominations… and still, there was no end to them.

Worse still, there were dreadful Nightmare Creatures climbing out of the Hollows to attack the rear of the battle formation, as well — each vastly more powerful than those attacking from the front. Because of

that, the attention of the Song Saints was split, and the front line received far less support from the Transcendent champions than it needed.

Lady Seishan was in the rear, as well, holding the ancient predators of the Hollows back while her army was being slowly consumed by the nightmare stampede. The Seventh Legion was currently being commanded by her personal retinue, the Blood Sisters.

Just as Rain thought about it, one of them appeared in view.

A swift silhouette of a beautiful woman with a slender figure plummeted from somewhere above, diving into the horde of Nightmare Creatures like a splash of red. Blood spilled like a river, and her crimson garments fluttered as she tore through the flood of abominations, rending them with what seemed like her bare hands.

Even though the Blood Sisters were merely Masters, each of them was worth a cohort of Ascended in battle. With just that woman alone joining the fray, the pressure on Rain's span of the front line lessened significantly, and she could finally catch her breath.

'Ah… I'm tired…'

The Blood Sisters were cold and unapproachable, usually keeping to themselves, so they seemed a little mysterious. Because of that, there were many strange rumors floating around about them — however, Rain did not care about those rumors one bit.

As far as she was concerned, these older sisters were the epitome of grace and coolness. At the moment, especially, she was ready to kowtow in front of them and sing them endless praise.

Using the momentary lull in the onslaught of abominations, she staggered toward Fleur and patted the delicate girl on the shoulder.

"Fleur… recharge, please…"

Even her seemingly inexhaustible Awakened endurance was being sorely tested by the grueling demands of this battle. The delicate young woman's Dormant Ability, meanwhile, could alleviate one's fatigue.

That was just what Rain needed after drawing the heavy string of her enchanted bows so many times.

Fleur looked up at her, forced out a smile, and raised her hand.

In the next moment, Rain felt as if she had been given a second wind. Of course, it was more like a sixth or seventh wind, already… in any case, her body felt reinvigorated, and a new strength filled her limbs.

She smiled back.

"Thanks."

Then, she nocked another arrow and drew her bow once again, quickly searching for new prey. She had already wounded, maimed, and killed many Nightmare Creatures…

What frightened her, though, was that no matter how many of them they killed, there did not seem to be fewer of the horrid creatures still hungering to taste their blood…

Chapter-1916: Burning the Bridges

A few moments later, the Blood Sister escaped from the tide of abominations, sliding dozens of meters back on the slick surface of the ancient bone. Coming to a halt just behind the frontliners, she straightened calmly, her beautiful face smeared with blood... none of which was her own.

Blood was also dripping from her hands, soaking the edges of her sleeves.

Her eyes, however, were eerily calm, as if she had not just perpetrated a brutal slaughter in the midst of a frenzied horde of Nightmare Creatures and then escaped unscathed. Her crimson garments had no tears in them, and her expression was cold and emotionless.

By mere coincidence, the Blood Sister was standing just a few steps away, so Rain could see every detail. She allowed herself to stare for a moment, then looked back at the carnage in front, worriedly searching for Tamar's swift figure.

It was easy to spot the young Legacy due to the fact that she moved like lightning, stepping on air to slay the abominations while avoiding their claws. Her giant zweihander was like a white blur, severing enormous beasts in half and taking off their limbs.

'...Still alive.'

The entire formation was pushed back, and Rain took another step back, as well. Her body was not exhausted yet thanks to Fleur, and her mind had not turned numb yet thanks to the Puppeteer's Shroud.

She drew her bow, aimed, and put another arrow through an

abomination's eye.

Usually, it would have been difficult for her to kill a Beast of such Rank in one shot, but her bow had an enchantment that enhanced the damage each of her arrows dealt. Her aim was even better, and she rarely failed to strike a weak point.

Just then, another Blood Sister appeared near the first — this one had come from the rear of the formation, with a somber look on her face.

The first Ascended turned her bloodied face toward her.

"What is it?"

The second answered in an even tone:

"Lady Seishan sends orders."

Rain could not help but hear their conversation, so her heart started to beat faster.

She did not see a way for the army to survive this avalanche of Nightmare Creatures… not without suffering crippling casualties, at least. But maybe the person in charge of the whole expedition had a solution.

The Blood Sister paused for a moment and then continued:

"There is no hope of withstanding this stampede in a frontal battle. We are to retreat into the Hollows."

The first one raised an eyebrow.

"Everyone? Awakened soldiers, too?"

The other Ascended nodded.

"Lady Seishan has already descended into the fissure to cleanse a landing zone for the army. The other Saints will hold the line while the troops follow. The Seventh Legion's precise orders are…"

Rain gulped.

Among all military maneuvers, an organized retreat was probably the hardest to pull off. One that included an orderly descent from a vertical cliff, though… was almost unheard of.

And they were not descending to safety, either. Instead, they were descending into the Hollows — a place where the weakest abomination could devour a Saint.

She suddenly felt cold despite the suffocating heat.

An army of Awakened would not survive in the Hollows… not without the support of a Sovereign's Domain, at least. Which meant that their only chance to live on was to reach the Citadel and conquer it.

By giving such an order, Lady Seishan was basically burning the bridges behind herself.

Well, it wasn't like they had a choice. They weren't going to survive this nightmare tide, either.

Rain sighed, and then furtively glanced at her shadow.

'...He'd better give me another Memory if I survive this. Two Memories, even!'

Before too long, there was the sound of a war horn, and the Song Army started the dreadful and laborious process of retreating into the vast fissure.

With how many soldiers there were in the expedition force, the process wasn't fast, and the battle had only grown more fierce as troops were pulled back and sent rappelling into the fissure.

The engineering corps had swiftly established moving platforms to hasten the process, and those with Aspect Abilities that could help in the descent were recalled to the rear.

Surrounded from all sides, the Song legions were gradually backing under the onslaught of an endless stampede of Nightmare Creatures. If they were too slow, they would be swallowed by the flood of abominations. If they were too fast, the fragile formation would

crumble, and countless soldiers would be pushed into the chasm, finding gruesome deaths after a long fall.

Rivers of blood spilled onto the white surface of the ancient bone.

Through all of that, Rain and her cohort had somehow stayed alive.

Fleur had run low on essence and ceased healing the soldiers, only using her Dormant Ability to help them stay in the fight. Ray stumbled back at some point, miserable and cradling a grisly wound. Tamar had assumed command of the entire centuria they were assigned to, at some point — simply because the Ascended centurion had died, and there was no one else to replace him.

Rain herself had used up all the essence stored in the Beast of Prey, felling an especially powerful abomination with a Death Dealer shot. By then, the front line of the legion had a few breaches in it, so she dismissed her bow, manifested the Mark of Shadows into a serpentine black tachi, and moved forward to join the melee fighters.

She was now protecting Tamar's back as the two of them fought desperately against the frenzied Nightmare Creatures.

Rain was controlling her soul essence with intricate finesse, which made her capable of displaying bursts of greater strength and speed than most Awakened could muster while spending less essence. Her swordsmanship was precise and deadly, and her mind was in a state of clarity… that was how she was barely managing to stay alive.

The Seventh Legion was one of the last ones to descend into the fissure.

By then, most of the Awakened soldiers had already entered the Hollows, and only the Saints were left on the surface, defending a much narrower battlefront with all their might.

Rain would have loved to observe these legendary figures unleash their powers in any other circumstances, but today, she just wanted to get away from the fury summoned by these human monsters.

Could they even be called humans?

From the few glimpses she had caught, Saints were much closer to demigods.

"Wake the hell up, Rani!"

Tamar, covered in monster blood and pale as a ghost pushed her onto a shaky wooden platform and then dragged Ray and Fleur to follow.

Around a hundred more soldiers crowded the platform, which then began to jerkily move down. The ropes creaked, and a few moments later, the surface of the white bone hid the battlefield from their view. Everyone felt tense, happy to escape from the terrible battle, but also apprehensive about the sturdiness of the platform and wary of what would happen next.

Rain let out a tired sigh, then crawled to the edge of the platform on all fours and carefully looked down.

There, far below…

The Hollows were waiting for them, full of darkness and terror.

Chapter-1917: Fast Promotion

Once the platform passed the great width of the porous bone, they were surrounded by emptiness from all sides. The vast Hollow sprawled beneath them, drowning in darkness. Here and there, radiant pillars of light fell from the cracks in its dome and illuminated the ancient jungle…

No one knew what unspeakable horrors hid under its impenetrable scarlet canopy, so the soldiers shivered, trying to distance themselves from the edges of the platform as much as possible.

Rain simply sat on the creaking wood, trying to catch her breath. She did look at the alien landscape below, but only for a short moment — seasoned hunters like her knew not to stare at the Dream Realm too closely.

Lest something stared back.

She looked at Ray.

"How's your wound?"

The young man was pale and uncharacteristically quiet. Fleur was treating him, but with how low she was on essence, the process was taking time.

The young man forced out an unconvincing smile.

"I'll live."

Then, he glanced down and paled even more.

"...Until we reach the ground, at least."

Tamar dismissed her helmet and sat down near Rain, swiping back her sweaty hair. She scowled and looked at him with scorn.

"Why are you worried? You have escaped the Hollows before — as a mere Sleeper and completely alone. You are an Awakened now, and we are surrounded by an entire army."

Ray stared at her gloomily.

"Don't remind me! I still have nightmares about that day… I mean, I would have, if I could dream…"

The other soldiers heard their conversation and turned, looking at the young man in disbelief.

"...Is that true, Ray? You survived the Hollows as a Sleeper?"

Ray seemed startled by the question.

"What the… wait, have I not regaled you guys with the amazing story of our chilling winter solstice? If that's the case, then — why, yes! Listen here… it happened on a dark and gloomy night..."

He launched into the story, making Rain wince — she had heard it retold at least a dozen times, after all, and each was more unwieldy than the previous one.

Still, she couldn't help but notice that the expressions of the soldiers eased a little as they listened to Ray talk. All of them were frightened, and hearing that three Sleepers had escaped from the Hollows alive gave them some much-needed solace, and maybe even a little hope.

It was probably Tamar's reason for bringing up their winter solstice all along.

Ray had been distracted from his wound, as well.

'How sneaky.'

That girl knew how to be subtle, as well.

Soon, the platform reached the ground, and they all disembarked, looking around with wary apprehension.

All around them, the battered soldiers of the expedition force were

sprawled on the ground, resting, or hurriedly wolfing down their rations. The wounded were being treated, the dead or missing were being tallied and mourned.

"Seventh Legion? Your position is right ahead!"

They were corralled to a particular area and left to their devices for a while. No one knew how long this rest would last, so the soldiers did not waste any time and dropped down, unpacking their provisions and dismissing their armor to bandage shallow wounds.

Tamar's cohort was no different.

"What do you think the commanders will do now?"

Fleur's voice sounded subdued… but not at all meek. Rain had assumed that the delicate girl was really soft at first, but after getting to know her better, she realized that their sweet healer had more spine than most Awakened.

She shrugged and looked into the darkness.

"We'll know soon."

They weren't properly in the Hollows yet. The fissure the army had used to descend here was so vast that sunshine freely poured down, and so, the scarlet infestation in a wide area was no older than on the surface. It had already been annihilated by the advance party led by Lady Seishan, making the landing zone relatively safe.

But not peaceful.

The sounds of the fighting above barely reached here, but there were other sounds reaching the makeshift camp from somewhere in the darkness — Lady Seishan and Death Singer were currently there, facing the old monsters of the Hollows in a bloody battle to clear a path for the army.

Deadly Nightmare Creatures in front of them, a vast horde of abominations behind them…

The expedition force was in a perilous position.

'Well… there's not much we can do about it.'

All they could do was fill their stomachs, replenish their strength, and prepare for battle.

Which was exactly what they did.

Half an hour later, a weary adjutant approached from deeper in the camp and gave something to Tamar, then ran off after saying a few words. The young Legacy remained motionless for a few moments, then sighed and sat back down.

Then, she attached a pin in the form of a blood drop to her armor, and threw another one, this one much smaller, to Rain.

"Congratulations, Rani. I guess you're my right-hand man now, which technically makes you a junior officer."

Rain caught the pin, raised an eyebrow, and asked in an amused tone:

"Goodness. I'm so honored I could cry. Right... what does it make you, then?"

Tamar stared at her bleakly.

"A captain. No, wait… a centurion, technically, since we're in a Royal Legion."

Ray whistled.

"Ever the overachiever."

The entire composition of the Song Army was a bit of a mess. There were brigades and divisions, following the unit structure borrowed from mundane armies, but also the seven Royal Legions, which did not.

The legions consisted of centuriae, which were supposed to consist of a hundred Awakened warriors, but were actually larger than that. In any case, these units of Awakened were usually led by an Ascended officer, called a centurion.

Tamar wasn't the first Awakened in the Song Army who had been given the command of a centuria, but she was definitely the youngest.

It was indeed quite an achievement.

The young Legacy did not seem too impressed, though. Instead, she grimaced and asked in a grumbling tone:

"Whatever. Is the food ready?"

Fleur smiled.

"Coming right up!"

They ate a simple, but filling meal in silence. After that, another messenger arrived, dropping a scattering of shimmering crystals in front of them.

Rain's eyes glistened.

'Finally!'

The crystals were, of course, soul shards.

Chapter-1918: Growing Strength

The souls shard were some of those that the engineers had time to scavenge from the corpses of the Nightmare Creatures in the recent battle. That task was important enough that it had to be completed even in the middle of the most terrifying clashes… after all, with every soldier that managed to fully saturate their soul core, the strength of the Song Army grew.

Tamar had long saturated hers, so the share of their cohort was divided three ways between Rain, Fleur, and Ray.

Today, that meant that Rain received about a dozen shards. The rewards were distributed according to the contribution of a cohort, and theirs always performed exemplary... granted, in a chaotic situation like this one, no one was actually keeping score — usually, the centurions would make reports to legion command after the battle, and the allocation of spoils would be decided later on.

But their centurion was dead, and the battle was not even over yet. So... Rain felt lucky to even receive anything.

All of these shards were of a higher Rank than Rain herself was, as well. It was a sizeable boon.

Forgetting her worries for a few minutes, she concentrated on shattering the shimmering crystals in her fist.

And look at that! She did not even need to use the pommel of her knife to break them. Just her Awakened strength was enough.

'I'll never grow used to it…'

A stray grin somehow found its way onto Rain's face.

She had not been Awakened for long, so the novelty of possessing

superhuman strength was yet to lose its luster. She loved the feeling of being strong, of being powerful… after all, it was the feeling of powerlessness that had instilled into her the desire to step on the path of Ascension all those years ago, to begin with.

Rain still remembered the day when a Nightmare Gate opened near her school clearly. The panic, the dazed faces of the students, the teachers who tried to look calm in front of the children, but still couldn't hide their fear.

She was supposed to die on that day, most likely. But through a twist of fate, somehow, she survived. An Awakened warrior appeared out of nowhere at the last moment, shielding Rain from the lunging abomination and slaying it with a single slash of her sword.

Rain's memories of that Awakened were strangely blurry… well, it wasn't that surprising, considering her mental state at that moment. She vaguely remembered a graceful black armor, a feminine silhouette, and a cold indifference with which the unknown woman cut down one Nightmare Creature after another, not letting a single one pass.

In the end, none of the students died. The teachers had survived, as well. And Rain… Rain had come to know that she never wanted to feel that weak again.

For her parents, for her siblings, and for herself as well.

Her path to Awakening had been a long and brutal one. She often complained and berated her teacher for his whimsical antics and unreasonable demands, wondering why she was putting herself through all that grief… but she had never once regretted her decision to strive for strength, and had never once regretted agreeing to her teacher's offer.

Even if Rain died in this godforsaken land, she would probably still die feeling gratified for having chosen strength over weakness. Strength… was a bit intoxicating, like a sweet drug.

And with each soul shard she absorbed, Rain grew stronger.

The improvement was small and incremental, but noticeable… especially now that she had already absorbed close to two hundred of them. Since most, if not all, Nightmare Creatures in the Godgrave were of a higher Rank than Rain, her core was supposed to be getting close to full saturation. The same was probably true for most Awakened warriors of the Song Army, as well.

…She was still unclear on how to Ascend without the help of the Spell, but this increase in overall power was most welcome.

"What's that stupid grin for, Rani?"

Crushing the last soul shard, Rain glanced at Ray and winked at him.

"That? Oh, I'm just glad to be an archer. How is the frontline duty treating you, stealth boy?"

He gritted his teeth and hissed in outrage:

"Hey! That's a low blow!"

She simply laughed.

Sadly, Rain had not laughed for long when a new command arrived, stirring the entire camp.

"Assemble! Battle march formation! Hurry, hurry, hurry! Move!"

Tamar sighed and jumped to her feet, going about bringing their centuria to order. The soldiers seemed a little disoriented, but not very surprised by the sudden command — no one had expected to get a good rest in the Hollows.

But why did the orders sound so urgent?

Soon enough, they found out.

"By the dead gods…"

High above them, ant-like figures appeared on the great vine bridges that stretched all the way to the surface, flowing down their twisting width like a tide. The engineers, who had been desperately trying to

destroy their roots, cursed and dashed away, dropping their tools as they ran.

It was a good decision — just a handful of seconds later, the first Nightmare Creature fell from above, its body hitting the ancient bone with a disgusting squelch.

The massive beast let out a shriek of agony, then struggled weakly, trying to stand up. Although its body was terribly damaged, it was still alive.

A split second later, there was another squelch, and then another.

…Driven mad by the smell of human souls, the horde of Nightmare Creatures was following the expedition force into the Hollows.

Rain broke her rule and stared at the flood of ant-like figures that covered the surface of the vine bridges far above.

Her hands shook a little.

'Well… crap.'

On second thought, maybe she should have chosen weakness over strength after all!

Then, the commanding shout of one of the Blood Sisters brought her back to reality.

"Move!"

Barely rested, the Song Army abandoned the relative safety of the illuminated area and marched into the darkness of the Hollows.

They were following a blood trail left by their commander, Princess Seishan.

Behind them, more and more Nightmare Creatures fell from high above. The fastest of those abominations who managed to remain on the vine pillars were already halfway down.

The future looked bleak, just like the dim expanse of the great

Hollow ahead.

Chapter-1919: Ancient Jungle

As the army marched into the jungle, several figures plummeted from high above to surround it. This time, however, they were not Nightmare Creatures — although some looked quite monstrous.

Instead, they were the Saints who had been holding the abomination tide back on the surface, and were retreating now that the enemy could not be stalled anymore.

Some had assumed their human forms to descend safely with the help of Memories, some were naturally able to fly while Transformed. Others simply took the fall, relying on the nature of their bestial bodies to withstand the damage. The thick canopy of the jungle helped cushion their fall, somewhat, but the impacts were still chilling.

In that brief moment, Rain noticed all kinds of awesome creatures.

There was a monstrous, but eerily beautiful harpy with blood dripping from her sharp claws and red lips. There was a giant with the head of a jackal, his towering body the color of obsidian. There was a hill-sized canine with three heads, his bloodied jaws powerful enough to grind mountains to dust.

There was a horrid creature that resembled a horned lion with a viper for the tail, drops of venom flowing from its fangs.

There was even an enormous reptile with powerful hind legs and short, underdeveloped arms, its tyrannical footsteps making the ground shake.

The Saints were battered and bleeding, their powerful bodies a map of wounds. However, they did not seem to pay it any attention — landing on the ground, they instantly assumed positions around the army, ready to defend the soldiers from those inhabitants of the

ancient jungle that had survived the passage of the daughters of Ki Song.

Sadly, the expedition force was so large that even three dozen Transcendent champions were not enough to protect everyone. The feeling of safety provided by the sight of them was an illusion.

Rain gripped her bow nervously as the scarlet canopy obscured the distant dome of the great Hollow.

Countless luminous Memories chased the darkness away, making it easy to see the surroundings. The jungle of the Hollows… was both similar and different to the one infesting the surface.

The shapes, the colors, and the smell were all the same. However, this jungle was much more ancient, and therefore, more harrowing.

The trees were many times taller, the vines were as thick as a human body, and the moss was deep enough to swallow a person whole in some places…

Of course, to digest them.

The trees were just as hungry, and some of the vines moved like enormous snakes, ensnaring people and rending their bodies with razor-sharp thorns.

There were blood-sucking insects the size of a human head and crawling bugs with mandibles long enough to bite off one's foot… those moved in swarms, of course, felling people and devouring them in a matter of seconds. Soon enough, the jungle was filled with the rustle of weapons and chilling screams.

The ancient jungle of the Hollows was absolutely deadly — and that was even after Princess Seishan and Death Singer had passed here, obliterating the most dangerous predators.

The traces of their passage were everywhere. The towering trees were snapped and shattered, the predatory vines torn apart. The hideously torn, enormous corpses of terrifying Nightmare Creatures were laying here and there like dark hills of torn flesh, lakes of fetid blood pooling below them.

In some places, entire swathes of the jungle were entirely destroyed, as if a hurricane had passed there.

Dark liquid was seeping from beneath the fallen trees.

Rain was stunned and horrified by the nightmarish reality surrounding her at first, but quickly grew numb to it. There was no time to feel fear, anyway.

"Another one!"

She drew her bow and let an arrow loose, aiming at the buzzing of wings above.

The blood-sucking horrors hid themselves in the thick canopy of the jungle and were too fast for an Awakened to see when they attacked — however, she could sense their shadows, see in the darkness, and hear them. That was just barely enough to give her a chance to hit the abominable vermin before they killed someone.

Their elongated, blade-like mouths were already deadly enough, leaving terrible wounds on the bodies of their victims. Much worse, they secreted some kind of toxin that paralyzed the victim, stopping a human heart in a matter of seconds. Usually, by the time the creature was noticed, it was already too late.

But not this time.

A blurry silhouette shot toward the marching soldiers from high above, but was intercepted by her arrow in the air. The wings and the carapace of these creatures were so tough that her enchanted bow couldn't even put a dent in them, but the soft belly was somewhat vulnerable.

Hit by the arrow, the blood-sucker lost balance and fell to the ground. Immediately, the Awakened soldiers rushed at it.

Their Memories were not powerful enough to kill the creature, so they struggled to immobilize it instead — special wire nets were thrown over the appalling insect, which it promptly tore apart and escaped. Luckily, the delay was enough for one of the Ascended to appear, shattering the creature's carapace with a devastating strike of

their heavy mace.

At that time…

Not too far away, a soldier was screaming as he found himself drowning in the scarlet patch of moss. His comrades managed to pull him free, but by then, his lower legs had already dissolved in the digestive fluid.

At the same time…

A tall tree shook, and a rain of vermilion leaves fell from its branches. Each leaf was like a serrated blade, easily slicing through enchanted armor, flesh, and bone. A dozen soldiers fell to the ground, bleeding — some of them dead, some gravely wounded. Both the dead and the living were then pulled underground by the roots that emerged from beneath.

Other humans tried to dig them up, but it was useless.

At the same time…

A vine covered in beautiful flowers released a cloud of scarlet pollen into the air, and a few soldiers that were not fast enough to escape dropped their weapons to the ground, walking into the red haze with empty expressions. By the time the pollen dissipated, they were gone — vanished without a trace, with not even footprints hinting at what might have happened to them.

Rain covered her mouth with a hand, looking around with horror.

'This… this is hell. It must be.'

All around the marching army, the Saints were engaged in desperate battles with the Great abominations that emerged from the jungle from time to time, attracted by the smell of human souls.

And behind the army, the tide of Nightmare Creatures was drawing closer with each minute, threatening to catch up with the formation's tail.

Surrounded and pursued, the warriors of Song marched toward the

distant Citadel.

Chapter-1920: Marching Through Hell

Eventually, the already dire situation turned into absolute chaos.

The horde of Nightmare Creatures had caught up with the expedition force, and the rear of the formation became engrossed in a moving battle. Several Saints led the defensive efforts, slaughtering the menacing abominations with all their might.

The death toll among the Nightmare Creatures was high, but the soldiers were suffering heavy casualties, as well.

Luckily — or perhaps unfortunately — the mad frenzy of the pursuing Nightmare Creatures had caused a destructive chain reaction in the Hollows. The local predators were overcome by hunger and bloodlust at the sight of human troops, but they weren't happy to see the numerous abominations from the surface invade their territory, either.

To the Great Ones inhabiting the ancient jungle, the weak surface dwellers were nothing but prey, just like humans were.

For that reason, the pursuing horde suffered a terrifying massacre when appalling silhouettes lunged into it from the jungle. The ancient predators grew mad from the stench of blood, slaughtering everything they could see with chilling cruelty… a few of them fell, too, buried under an avalanche of hideous monsters.

The internal strife between the rightful rulers of the Hollows and the invading surface dwellers alleviated some of the pressure on the army, but not a lot of it.

The expedition force was still bleeding lives — not a staggering number of them, but more than ever before.

The people trapped in this morbid hell soon found themselves missing the unpredictable and inescapable radiance of the deadly sky. Who would have thought?

Rain, meanwhile…

Was missing the weird antics and ridiculous stories of her teacher.

In the past four years, she had lived through plenty of frightening situations. Hunting Nightmare Creatures as a mundane girl was not a safe vocation, after all… but he was always there, with her, talking her through the difficult ordeals and taking care of her when she felt lost.

He was still with her, hiding in her shadow, but because they were surrounded by thousands of soldiers, her teacher could not speak.

Even though Rain would never admit it, she would have loved to hear him tell an outrageously nonsensical story with a straight face right now.

'Let's see…'

Breathing heavily, she helped Tamar deal with a monstrous tick that had lunged at them from a branch and assessed how much essence she had left.

One benefit of not having an Aspect was that she rarely ran low on it, unlike other Awakened. So, Rain was doing quite fine, for now.

'What would he say in this situation?'

Probably something like… "What, this? This is nothing! Have I told you about that time I climbed into a Cursed Terror's nest and stole its egg? I was actually looking for tasty fruit to treat someone special, but that nest was in the way…"

Actually, he might have really told her that one.

Or…

"The Hollows? Oh, I've been there. On a date, of sorts. With Lady

Changing Star. Who is my girlfriend…"

Despite the dreadful situation, Rain smiled crookedly.

'Yeah, right.'

She could actually believe that her teacher had stolen from a Cursed Terror once — he did look like the kind of scoundrel to attempt such lunacy — but that last one was too laughably ridiculous even by his standards.

Manifesting another arrow in her enchanted quiver, she nocked it on the string of her bow and took a deep breath.

'Let's just survive. Believe in Lady Seishan… she will not lead her army to certain doom.'

If not because she was a virtuous leader…

Then at least because she needed that army to fight the forces of the Sword Domain in the future.

'The Citadel must not be that far, by now.'

And it wasn't.

Some time later, the Seventh Legion was sent to the rear of the formation. They steeled their hearts and plunged into the bloodshed, retreating slowly while holding back the frenzied mob of Nightmare Creatures. The Saints were fighting some distance away, breaking the tide, while the soldiers served as the shield of the formation.

In some ways, it was much more dangerous here, in the rear of the escaping army — that was because the abominations were numerous and driven to utter madness both by their lust for human souls and by the terror of the Great Ones rampaging in the horde far behind.

Between the ancient rulers of the Hollows and the human soldiers, countless Nightmare Creatures had already been slain, and more were dying each minute.

But in other ways, fighting against them was much safer than

marching further into the army formation. That was because most of the dangers hiding in the ancient jungle — like the blood-sucking horrors, the razor-sharp falling leaves, the man-eating patches of moss, and the clouds of scarlet pollen — would be dealt with or at least discovered by those who marched in the front.

After withstanding the flood of abominations for a while, the Seventh Legion was rotated to the head of the column.

By then, the army had almost caught up with the daughters of Ki Song.

Rain and the other legionnaires dragged their tired bodies to the front of the formation, where they were supposed to get a little rest. Since Lady Seishan and Death Singer were so close, the jungle was safer than before — its inhabitants had just been slaughtered by the Transcendent princesses, and those pests that had survived were hiding, afraid to attract their attention.

Finally, they caught sight of their general.

Lady Seishan was standing on the trunk of a fallen tree, her crimson dress ripped and soaked in blood. Her eyes were sunken, and a dark smile was twisting her alluring red lips.

Her sister was leaning on the trunk, huddled and covering her face with the hood of her black robe.

Rain was curious to know what they were looking at.

Up ahead, behind the fallen tree, the jungle receded, revealing a vast clearing.

And there, in the distance…

She could finally see the Citadel.

Chapter-1921: Stuff of Legends

There, in front of them, the jungle parted and revealed a vast expanse of white bone. It was almost completely flooded, but the water was so shallow that it would barely reach a human's shins. Most stunningly of all, the flooded clearing was completely devoid of the scarlet infestation — there were no trees, no vines, no grass, no moss…

It was as if the ancient jungle was afraid of getting any closer to the dark hill that towered in the heart of the empty expanse and reeled back in fear.

The hill itself was tall and strangely shaped, its slopes dark and barren. From time to time, strange ripples spread from it across the shallow water, reaching all the way to the edge of the jungle. As if something enormous was breathing somewhere out there, behind the hill, the measured weight of its breaths reverberating in the ancient bones.

Rain and her cohort were not far away from the fallen tree on which Lady Seishan stood, so she caught a good look at her.

At that moment, the regal Saintess turned around, looking down at her sister from the considerable height of the ancient trunk.

Standing above the battered masses of the Seventh Legion, she was like a sinister deity. Her otherworldly beauty was both breathtaking and chilling — Princess Seishan looked subtly inhuman because of her silken grey skin, and the lower half of her exquisite face was smeared by crimson blood, as if she had been tearing the Great Nightmare Creatures apart with her teeth.

She looked like a malevolent spirit summoned into the world by a great blood sacrifice.

…Despite that, Rain found herself calming down at the sight of the graceful princess. Her heart was overcome by a soothing sense of tranquillity, and she felt her fears dissipating.

The feeling of peace and safety was like a breath of fresh air in the sweltering heat of this dark, dreadful hell.

However, Rain felt strangely disturbed.

Because, to her… it did not feel like the healing kind of tranquil calmness. Instead, it was like the kind of false relaxation that deadly predators instilled in their prey before sinking their fangs into the victim's flesh.

'Still, this predator is on our side. That's good… right?'

Lady Seishan, meanwhile, spoke to her sister in a pleasant, velvety voice:

"What do you sense, Hel?"

Death Singer, who was leaning on the fallen tree with her head down, flinched and looked up. Her hood slipped, revealing her luscious hair and lovely face.

At the moment, however, that face was contorted by a terrible grimace. Her beautiful eyes were wide, full of fear.

"D—death… death is coming! Our blood will flow like a river, our flesh will fester and rot, our eyes will be eaten by hungry ravens, our viscera will become a feast for maggots! There will be no hope, no escape, no relief, no salvation… death is coming! It's here!"

Hearing that terrible prophecy, Rain shuddered. Even Tamar seemed to pale, gripping the hilt of her zweihander tighter.

Lady Seishan, however, seemed unperturbed. She smiled and nodded patiently.

"Yes, yes. You've been saying that since we were in the orphanage. I'm sure we will die one day, you and I… but what about now? What do you sense now?"

Death Singer stared at her sister for a few moments, her face a mask of terror.

Then, she suddenly sighed and shook her head.

"Oh, that. Well…"

The petite princess frowned and scratched the back of her head clumsily. After a while, she said in a nonchalant tone:

"It's a Great Demon, I guess."

Death Singer might have been nonchalant, but every soldier that heard her shuddered.

Rain did, as well.

'Crazy… this is crazy!'

What the hell was she doing here, in a Death Zone, hearing about Great Demons?

Great Nightmare Creatures were something that humans theoretically knew existed, but were never supposed to encounter. They were the stuff of legends — the kind of legends that were too terrifying to retell in the darkness. Great abominations were synonymous with death from before Rain was born…

The regions of the Dream Realm where they dwelled were called Death Zones for a reason!

But now, the rules and laws that had seemed inviolable were swiftly changing. Supreme humans were out there in the world, and people like Rain suddenly found themselves brushing sides with Great Nightmare Creatures.

She had already seen several dead ones in the jungle, and had caught glimpses of several more rampaging in the horde of the weaker abominations.

But at least those terrible beings were mere Beasts and Monsters.

A Demon… a Demon was a different kind of being.

Because demons were intelligent, and possessed their own malignant wills.

'D—damnation…'

Out of everyone, only Lady Seishan remained calm.

She turned her bloodied face to gaze at the distant hill once more, remained silent for a few moments, and then nodded.

"So it is. Well, then... warriors of the Song Army, hear my order!"

Her crimson dress moved in the wind as she spoke in a melodious voice:

"Fortify this position and hold fast. Hel, Siord, Ceres — with me! We will claim this Citadel... in the name of the Queen!"

Death Singer sighed again, straightened her dark robe, and jumped onto the fallen tree. At the same time, Lady Seishan jumped down — the trunk was several meters tall even laying on its side, so Rain did not see her land into the shallow water, only heard the splash.

A moment later, two Saints joined the daughters of Ki Song on the edge of the clearing — one of them was the beautiful harpy Rain had seen before, the other was the three-headed canine.

From what she knew, both were scions of the lesser Legacy Clans, like Tamar, and had attained Sainthood together with Lady Seishan as members of her cohort.

Soon, the four Saints disappeared in the direction of the distant hill.

And a few moments later…

The hill suddenly moved, slowly stirring and unfurling its immense limbs.

Rain stared at it in horror for a moment, then force herself to look away and lowered her gaze.

As it turned out… the Great Demon had not been hiding behind the hill. It was the hill — a gargantuan beast that had been slumbering in the middle of the vast clearing, and was now waking up at the smell of Transcendent souls.

Rain took a shaky breath and thought about the four brave Saints.

'...May Beast God help them from beyond the grave.'

Clan Song seemed to have a close bond with beasts and hunting, so she thought this prayer would be suitable.

Rain considered praying for herself, too.

She was quite sure that if Lady Seishan failed to conquer the Citadel and perished, the rest of the expedition force would perish as well.

'Oh well...'

At least she had her personal dark deity to pray to.

Chapter-1922: Not a Last Stand

Now that the dreadful march was over, the battered expedition force found itself in a somewhat better position.

The flooded clearing was effectively defending them from one side, which meant that they would not be surrounded, at least. With that, the army could assemble into a stable battle formation.

It was truly a miracle of perseverance and discipline that they had managed to maintain a semblance of order and keep themselves from being decimated by the enemy while fighting their way through the nightmarish jungle — but armies were not meant to fight battles while moving.

Finally reaching their destination, the Song Army came to a halt and spread along the edges of the flooded plain, building a proper battle line. It had two layers, so that forward units could rotate back and give way to fresh troops — then switch again after a period of rest. A field hospital was being hastily arranged behind the two layers, as well.

By then, the stalwart Saints already cut down the terrifying predators who had lunged at the expedition force from the flanks during the march. Those were the true rulers of the Hollows, old abominations of the Great Rank — luckily, there were far fewer of them than the Saints, so the champions of the human army were able to team up and bring each of the monsters down in groups of three or four.

Many were wounded, but none had perished yet… the situation might have been different if not for Lady Seishan and Princess Hel, though, who had culled the rulers of the scarlet jungle on their way to the Citadel. Now, the Saints were free to assume positions in front of the battle line, serving as its pillars and anchors.

In any case, the situation of the Song Army, while still resembling a

hellish nightmare, was much better than before.

However, it was also much more perilous than before, because their fates now depended on the success of Lady Seishan and her party. If the Great Demon guarding the Citadel triumphed, then every advantage gained by the expedition force would turn to ash. The Demon would attack the battle formation from the rear, and they would be devoured from two sides.

Of course…

First, the army had to survive long enough to learn who prevailed in the battle for the Citadel.

'It's going to be fine. Yeah… definitely…'

Rain stared at the approaching tide of Nightmare Creature with apprehension, trying to convince herself that the current preparations of the Song Army did not resemble getting ready for a heroic last stand.

Lost in a godforsaken hell, suffocated by sweltering heat, their back pressed against the territory of a Great Demon, and facing an endless flood of Nightmare Creatures — that definitely sounded like prime material for an inspiring and tear-inducing ballad that would be sung through the ages. But Rain didn't want to be sung about… she would much rather survive.

Heroes were very admirable, but they were also very dead. She had no aspirations of becoming a hero.

'Damn it.'

"Archers!"

The Seventh Legion was currently on the frontline, preparing to clash with the vanguard of the nightmare horde. The Blood Sisters — there were around a dozen of them — were very noticeable among the centurions with their red garments and striking beauty. Seeing them gave the soldiers some confidence, and it was these women who commanded the legion in the absence of Lady Seishan.

So, the voice that called upon the ranged specialists to unleash their fury on the approaching horde was rather melodious, making the grim scene feel less horrid.

Rain drew her bow, took aim, and let an arrow loose. With how numerous the Nightmare Creatures were, one would think that she did not have to aim too well in order to hit something… but sadly, that was not the case. Because her arrows were not powerful enough to pierce the hides of the abominations, she had to strike them precisely in a weak spot.

Which was why the horde was not slowed down at all by the devastating barrage of arrows, various projectiles, and Aspect Abilities unleashed by the human army. It was like mundane archers showering heavily armored cavalry with arrows — a few abominations stumbled and fell, but most remained unscathed. Worse still, the Nightmare Creatures were not at all deterred by these losses.

Soon after, they crashed into the battle formation.

Rain continued to shoot, trying to remain stable on the quaking ground. In front of her, the tide of monsters broke against the Saints, flowed past them, and reached the front line of the Seventh Legion. Tamar and Ray were in front of her, surrounded by the Awakened warriors of their centuria — which was in a worse situation than most because it lacked an Ascended, but luckily positioned well.

Some distance from them, the Saint whose Transcendent form was that of a giant reptile towered above the flood of Nightmare Creatures. It lowered its neck and snapped its jaws, eviscerating several of them at the same time, then swiped its long tail sideways, crushing even more.

An especially large beast jumped on its back, but the tyrannical reptile simply snapped its jaws once more, grabbing it and throwing the bleeding corpse flying hundreds meters back with a jerk of its head.

Then, it let out a chilling roar and plunged further into the horde of abominations.

'...The bow is useless.'

Now that the Nightmare Creatures had closed in, it was harder for her to hit anything with an arrow. The situation might have been different if they were in an open field, but the jungle blocked her line of sight, while the thick canopy prevented her from shooting over the heads of her comrades.

Cursing, Rain dismissed the Beast of Prey and let her snake tattoo turn into a black tachi once again. Gritting her teeth, she left Fleur and advanced forward.

Hack, slash, pierce… block, dodge, evade.

The damned Nightmare Creatures were too strong!

She could barely cut their hide, and it took dozens of strikes to bring a single one down. Rain herself, however, would be either dead or crippled from receiving just one blow, which made the whole situation incredibly frightening, to the point that she felt sick to her stomach.

The humid air was permeated by the terrible stench of blood, and everywhere she looked, she saw nothing but terrible maws, sharp fangs, and frenzied eyes.

All around her, Awakened were uniting in small groups, each fighting against a single Nightmare Creature. Rain herself was fighting with Tamar and Ray, the three of them sharing an unspoken understanding on how to deal with the dreadful enemies.

Their cohort might not have been together for long, but Tamar was a competent leader, while Rain was very experienced despite having only just Awakened. So, from the point of view of others, she was simply extremely competent in everything she did.

She was a fierce fighter herself, a good partner for others in a battle, and also a bit of a mentor to her three slightly younger companions in many practical matters.

Not to mention her unbelievable ability to survive in the wilderness and make herself and her cohort comfortable in any environment.

The entire centuria rallied around their small cohort, withstanding the flood of Nightmare Creatures with desperate resolve.

Hideous corpses of the abominations fell to the ground.

Human corpses fell, too.

Rivers of blood flowed down, seeping into the shallow water of the flooded clearing and painting it red.

Far away, the gargantuan figure of the Great Demon was moving, its footsteps making the red water surge in foaming waves.

Chapter-1923: Dwindling Hope

"Just… die, damn you!"

Rain staggered back, supporting the blade of her tachi with a hand to block a descending stinger — its speed was so great that she had barely managed to react in time, and its force was so terrible that she was thrown back a dozen meters.

Her arms felt numb.

When fighting Nightmare Creatures of a superior Rank, blocking was really not a good idea. But the damned thing was so fast that there was simply no time for her to move out of the way.

Luckily, she had done her job.

A split second after Rain was tossed back, Tamar's zweihander plummeted on the tail of the abomination, striking precisely at the spot where its armor had already been broken. The severed stinger fell to the ground in a flood of fetid blood, and the monstrous creature turned threateningly toward the young centurion, its claws flying forward at lightning speed.

Tamar had no time to disengage and dash to the side — she simply stepped on air and leaped over the claws, then did so again. This time, the invisible platform seemed to be situated perpendicular to the ground, so she threw her body sideways instead of up, twisting and landing in a slide.

The Nightmare Creature was already lunging at her, but at that moment, Ray — whom it had not noticed, blinded by pain — jumped onto its carapace and drove his sword through its eye.

The abomination convulsed and fell, moving weakly. It was still alive, but completely dazed — the three Awakened rushed forward

and unleashed a barrage of attacks, eventually finishing it off.

All three were breathing heavily, barely enduring their exhaustion — and that was despite the occasional infusion of stamina from Fleur.

The rest of the soldiers were faring even worse.

Rain shivered, noticing that another Nightmare Creature was already barreling in their direction.

'Just how many…'

The ground was already littered with so many corpses that it was hard to see the scarlet moss beneath. They couldn't go on much longer.

Luckily, at that moment, the familiar, reassuring voice of the Blood Sister reached them like the most beautiful melody in the world:

"Seventh Legion! Retreat!"

Their turn on the frontline was over… this turn, at least.

The legion retreated in an orderly manner, and at the same time, another brigade advanced between their ranks.

Soon, their backs hid the battlefield from Rain's view, and she let out a relieved sigh.

Moving back almost all the way to the edge of the water, the Seventh Legion came to a halt. The soldiers fell to the ground where they stood, shell-shocked, exhausted, and covered in blood. Some dismissed their armor despite the dire danger — the heat was just too unbearable, and they were all drowning in sweat.

Everyone was dehydrated, so the first thing many did was greedily drink water from their canteens.

Rain was no exception.

"Ah…"

After drinking her share, she finally felt alive again.

While Fleur was tending to their wounds — all minor, fortunately — and infusing them with refreshing vitality, the three members of the cohort who had actively participated in the melee remained silent. Honestly, they were too stunned by the magnitude and ferocity of the violence, too dazed, and too tired to talk.

Even Tamar, who had been programmed to always maintain composure by her clan, seemed subdued and shaken.

None of them had died yet, at least. The same could not be said about most other cohorts. The number of slain Nightmare Creatures was incalculable, but the casualties suffered by the Song Army were also heavy.

'...It is not a last stand.'

Rain knew that it wasn't, but it seemed like one more and more with each passing minute.

The Seventh Legion had fought well during their first rotation, and during the second, too. However… during the third, the tired soldiers started to make more and more mistakes. As a result, more and more of them died.

They had just finished the fifth rotation, and the situation was starting to look bleak — not just for them, but for the entire army.

The warriors of Song were desperate, exhausted, and slowly succumbing to fear.

Their morale had especially plummeted when one of the Saints — the one whose Transformation resembled a horned lion with a venomous viper for the tail — finally fell, debilitated by countless wounds, and was immediately swallowed by the tide of Nightmare Creatures. Like that, the Song Army lost its first Transcendent champion.

Watching a Saint die was a shock to everyone… not only because they were watching the death of a living legend, but also because it forced the soldiers to ask themselves a simple question.

If even demigods were dying, then what hope did mere mortals like them have?

Rain threw a glance at her shadow, drawing strength from it, then turned to the flooded clearing and stared into the distance with a detached expression.

The battle had been unbearably hard on the army, lasting an eternity… she couldn't imagine how Lady Seishan and her team could still be alive while fighting a Great Demon, but they were, continuing the devastating battle.

Even though it was taking place too far to discern the silhouettes of the daughters of Ki Song, everyone in the second layer of the battle formation could turn around and look at the flooded plain to see the massive shape of the Demon moving across the water, making it surge and boil.

At some point — Rain did not know when — the water, which had been clear and transparent before, had turned entirely red, like a lake of blood. Some of it was because of the blood flowing from the shore where the Song Army was fighting, but most of it… she had no idea where it had come from.

Something flashed in the distance, and a few moments later, the echo of a terrifying roar reached them from afar. The ground quaked, and the lake of blood surged, a tall wave crashing into the low shore.

The Queen's daughters were still fighting the Great Demon.

Chapter-1924: Pit of Despair

In the middle of the flooded clearing, Song Seishan was standing in the crimson water, looking at the gargantuan creature in front of her with a twisted smile. Her eyes were shining with an eerie red glow in the dim darkness of the Hollows, and her long braid was fluttering in the wind that had risen from the Demon's last attack.

The Great One was like a mountain, its mighty body covered by bristling black fur. Its body was not quite bestial, but also not quite human… the creature was like an abominable ape, its fangs protruding like cliffs, its eyes burning with diabolical cunning and murderous fury. It was wielding a great club made out of bone, and each time it struck the ground, the entire world quaked.

Siord, the beautiful harpy, was playing a deadly game of cat and mouse with the demonic ape by flying around its head, barely dodging its obliterating attacks. Ceres, the enormous three-headed canine, was in an even more precarious position, dancing between the abomination's feet and trying to tear pieces of flesh out of its shins.

Neither had managed to deliver even a single wound to the Great Demon, yet.

However, the Demon was bleeding.

Opening its maw, the terrifying creature let out a deafening roar and shuddered, forgetting about the annoying fly and the three-headed pest for a moment.

Then, it vomited a terrifying waterfall of blood.

Blood was flowing from its mouth, from its nose… even from the corners of its eyes, spilling into the shallow water like a red river.

That was because Seishan was using her Awakened Ability. It had taken a while for her Ability to take effect, considering how powerful her enemy was… but she wasn't powerless, either.

If anything, the most difficult part was limiting the area of effect of her Ability to spare her allies from sharing the same fate as the Demon.

The intoxicating smell of blood was driving her mad, and at the same time making her many times stronger — standing in the middle of a lake of blood spilled by a Great abomination, Seishan was infused with a raging inferno of hungry, furious power. It was the scaling augmentation granted by her Ascended Ability.

It was partially because of that power that she had been able to move with stunning speed to evade the Demon's earth-shattering attacks and recover from the terrible wounds littering her body, staying alive despite how vast the gap between her and the guardian of the Citadel was.

The second reason was her Transformation Ability.

Seishan had possessed the ability to turn into a monster from the time she was a young Sleeper, lost in the darkness of the Forgotten Shore. Therefore, she had not gained the ability to Transform into something else when attaining Transcendence…

Instead, she had gained the ability to Transform others — those she transformed became stronger, and their strength could enhance her own power in turn.

And finally, the third reason was the blood of Beast God that flowed in her veins, bestowed upon her — whether she had wanted it or not — by her mother... the Raven Queen.

And then, there was her Flaw.

Seishan grinned and dashed forward, flying above the red water with stunning speed. The infuriated Demon swatted Siord away and kicked Ceres with devastating might, sending the giant canine flying like a tiny pup. Both Saints crashed into the shallow water, their bodies

bleeding and broken.

After that, she was the sole target of the Great One's fury.

'Ah…'

The enormous bone club crashed into the ground, displacing countless tons of water and making the world shake. Seishan never slowed down, pivoting and then leaping gracefully. Before the displaced water could even start raining down, she already landed on the surface of the club and rushed across its surface, ascending hundreds of meters above the clearing in a heartbeat.

Her polished nails turned into terrifying claws, and the red glow of her eyes turned furious and predatory, full of murderous intent.

Sadly…

She knew that she could not kill the Great Demon.

Maybe if she had time to observe and study the abomination, learning its strengths and weaknesses, gaining a thorough understanding of its powers, and getting insight into the way its perverse mind worked, she would stand a chance.

But she was forced to attack it blindly, without making any targeted preparations, so her chances were close to zero. Just the sheer size of the abominations was already an obstacle — not to mention every unholy trait and Attribute that thing possessed.

Siord and Ceres were severely wounded and would not be joining the fight again.

...But that was alright.

There was a reason why Seishan survived the longest out of anyone who had ever been sent to the Forgotten Shore. That reason was that she knew how to find a way out of the most desperate situation… and then drown her enemies in the pit of despair she had escaped.

Right now, for example, there was little chance of defeating the Great Demon. Therefore, there was no reason to try.

Instead, her goal was simply to draw its attention — which she had already done — and stall it for a while.

After all, they had not come here to slay a Great Demon.

They had come here to conquer a Citadel.

And while Seishan was dancing with death by enduring the wrath of the dreadful abomination, her sister Hel was sneaking into the Citadel to claim its Gateway.

The Great Demon raised its club, lifting Seishan ever higher above the surface of the water.

For a moment, she was level with its enormous head, and saw the waterfalls of blood flowing from its maw and nostrils.

She shivered, feeling her Flaw call upon her from somewhere deep, deep within.

Seishan licked her alluring red lips.

'Ah. I want to taste it…'

***

"Advance!"

The battered Seventh Legion rushed forward once again. The retreating soldiers stumbled between them, bleeding and barely staying upright. Their pale faces and sunken eyes were full of numb terror.

Reaching the frontline, Rain saw a carpet of corpses covering the ground everywhere she looked. Most belonged to hideous Nightmare Creatures, but many were those of humans — some sickeningly mangled, some strangely intact.

There were so many dead that the ancient jungle seemed unable to swallow them all, its profane hunger satiated for the first time in eons.

'Curse it all…'

The Song Army was still holding fast, but its breaking point was drawing close. Once they reached it and the battle line collapsed, an even more harrowing slaughter would take place, and all of them would be devoured by the rampaging of Nightmare Creatures.

"Stay alive! Forward, together! For the Queen!"

Tamar's shout brought her back to her senses.

Gripping the hilt of her black tachi, Rain gritted her teeth and braced herself.

A moment later, the Nightmare Creatures were upon them.

'Hopeless. It is hopeless...'

No matter how much they fought, no matter how much they killed, no matter how much they died… the flood of abominations would not end.

And these Nightmare Creatures were the lesser evil, at that. Even if the expedition force somehow managed to eradicate them all, the true horrors of the Hollows would soon arrive, attracted by the overwhelming smell of blood.

Rain felt a chilling shiver run down her spine when she realized that she could, indeed, die here today.

Her sweat turned cold, and she drew in a shaky breath.

And then…

Something imperceptible changed about the world.

It was as if the sweltering heat of Godgrave receded a little, and a cool breeze gently caressed her skin.

Rain was not just imagining it, either. She could see her fellow soldiers react to the strange change, too.

Even the Nightmare Creatures were affected. Their ceaseless onslaught turned slower, for a moment, and then lulled.

'What…'

Confused and struggling to believe what she was seeing, Rain stared at the abominations. The abominations had actually stopped, and were now sniffing the air, growling, and… and…

It almost seemed as though some of them were cowering in fear.

...Far behind her, in the middle of the flooded clearing, the gargantuan Great Demon noiselessly fell down.

And, at the same time…

Rain froze in terror.

The countless corpses littering the vast swath of the jungle all moved at the same time.

The dead Nightmare Creatures, the fallen humans... they all stirred, moved, and then slowly rose from the ground.

Far behind her, the slain Great Demon was rising from the bloody water, as well, its dead eyes staring forward with no emotion.

Rain took a step back, her face turning even paler than usual.

'The… the Queen…'

A moment later, the legion of the dead came alive, tearing into the nightmare horde.

Soon after that, the battle was over.

The Queen of Worms had finally arrived to Godgrave.

Chapter-1925: Missing Oracle

Far away, Sunny — his original body, donning the guise of the charming Master Sunless — was sitting on the edge of the Ivory Island with a resigned smile on his face, suffering in silence.

'D—amn… nation. It's torture.'

His nose was itching.

It had been itching for what felt like an eternity already, but sadly, he could not scratch it. He could not move at all, really, because the Cloudveil was torn above the warcamp of the Sword Army, drowning the world in a blinding white light.

The camp stretched below him, resembling a city — there was no movement on the orderly avenues, and the countless people populating it had all turned into motionless statues. Their silhouettes were like black shadows painted on the blurry white backdrop, melting in the stark radiance.

Mercifully, that was simply because his eyes were tearing up, not because they were turning to ash.

Now that Saint Tyris had left to accompany the expedition force on its quest to conquer the Citadel, the main camp of the Sword Army had lost her protection. That was why everyone had been forced to learn how to survive the annihilating gaze of the incandescent abyss — now, several weeks later, people rarely died when the clouds parted.

Of course, there were measures in place to alert them of the imminent danger in advance.

Sunny was not entirely sure how that was achieved, but there were countless talents in the Sword Domain, both mundane and

Awakened. He did not doubt that someone would have come up with a method to predict the movement of clouds — granted, the warnings rarely came more than a minute before the cloudbreak, so the method clearly still required some improvement.

This time, the clouds parted while Sunny was searching for Cassie, leaving him no choice but to sit down and patiently wait for the danger to pass. It had been close to an hour since then, and the grey veil was finally starting to show signs of repairing itself.

Ten minutes later, the blinding radiance finally subsided, and Sunny furiously scratched his nose.

"Ah… damn it…"

He wondered if anyone in Godgrave had died from sneezing yet, then rose to his feet and looked around.

Sunny had already checked everywhere on the Ivory Island, including the underground level of the Ivory Tower and Cassie's personal quarters. He had checked every cabin of the Chain Breaker, as well, and asked around among the Fire Keepers.

No one had seen the blind seer, which could only mean one thing — that she was performing her duties as the Seneschal of the Great Clan Valor somewhere in the camp.

Unless something out of the ordinary had happened…

Frowning, he walked over to one of the seven chains anchoring the Ivory Island to the ground and descended by walking across it. Sunny was reluctant to unleash his shadow sense here, so his best choice was to go check personally.

Fortunately, Valor Keep — the stone stronghold that served as the headquarters of the Sword Army and the residence of the King — was not far. He reached it in a matter of minutes and hesitated at the entrance, feeling uncomfortable under the dubious gazes of the guards.

The thing was… Sunny had only ever entered the Keep while accompanying either Nephis or Cassie. He had never been here alone,

and wasn't sure if he was even allowed inside.

Clearing his throat, he hesitated for a moment, cringed inwardly, and addressed the guards in a commanding tone:

"I am Sir Sunless, Knight Commander of the Ardent Wardens. Move aside."

'Gods, I actually said it...'

The guards stared at him some more. Eventually, one of them sneered.

"Oh, yes. We know precisely who you are… Sir Sunless."

The derision in his voice was not even hidden, but the guards did move aside.

Sunny glowered at them for a moment, then walked into the gate.

Halfway across the threshold, however, he halted, backed a few steps, and looked at the rude guard for a moment.

Then, a pleasant smile appeared on his face.

"...Do you, perhaps, want to challenge me to a duel?"

The guard paled a little, shivered, and slowly shook his head.

"N—no... Knight Sunless, sir."

Sunny's smile brightened menacingly.

"Thought so."

With that, he entered the stronghold without looking back.

Nephis was gone from the camp, as well, so people were getting braver as far as showing him their contempt was concerned. Sunny did not really mind, but it was starting to get tiresome. Perhaps it was time to teach them another lesson in humility…

But not now.

Sighing, Sunny found the nearest person wearing the colors of Clan Valor and inquired if Song of the Fallen was nearby.

He had not really expected a positive answer, but to his surprise, the man simply nodded and gave him directions to a certain chamber in the depths of the keep.

The chamber was guarded by several Knights, which gave him pause. Although nothing showed on his face, Sunny felt his whole body tense up for a moment, and his heart started to race.

Were these Ascended guards sent to protect Cassie as a sign of how highly she was valued by Clan Valor… or were they here to make sure that she couldn't escape? Was there a sorcerous cage inside the chamber that cut off her powers, similar to the one in which the two of them had spent an unforgettable time in the Night Temple?

This was the burden of being a double agent for a regicidal insurgency… Sunny never knew if he was one heartbeat away from having his treasonous ways revealed.

He lingered for a moment, then asked with decorum:

"Is Saint Cassia inside?"

One of the Knights looked down at him sternly… then nodded and turned around to knock on the door politely.

"You have a visitor, my lady."

Hearing Cassie's response, he opened the door and let Sunny inside.

The chamber was sparsely furnished, but quite comfortable. There was a soft sofa, several armchairs, a wooden table with succulent fruit and refreshments, and even a Memory keeping the air cool, not to mention a few bottles of beverages from the waking world. Vermilion curtains moved slightly in the wind, and sunlight was pouring through a narrow window.

Cassie was half-sitting, half-laying on the sofa, her beautiful face showing signs of extreme fatigue. One of the hands was lowered powerlessly, while the other was holding a silver goblet.

Sunny was worried for a moment, then determined that there were no wounds on her body and let out a sigh of relief.

The blind seer, meanwhile, turned her head in his direction.

"...Who is it?"

He frowned.

Shouldn't she know already?

Then again… their mental link seemed to be inactive, which meant that Cassie's Ascended Ability was suppressed, for some reason. If the same was true for her Awakened Ability, which allowed her to sense what would happen a few seconds in the future, then she would be truly and utterly blind.

Sunny's frown deepened.

"It's me, Saint Cassia. Master Sunless."

He threw a glance at her Ascended guards and unceremoniously closed the door. That would not prevent them from eavesdropping on their conversation, but it was better than nothing.

A pale smile illuminated Cassie's face.

"Sunny… it's good that you're here. I was just thinking about asking someone to escort me back to the Ivory Island."

Sunny took a deep breath, considered his thoughts for a moment, and then asked bluntly:

"What happened to you?"

He thought that he already knew the answer.

In hindsight, it was quite obvious.

Cassie sighed, then dropped her head on the soft armrest of the sofa.

Her voice was a little tired:

"...Essence exhaustion."

Chapter-1926: Enhanced Interrogation

A few moments later, Sunny led Cassie out of the stronghold. Since she was currently robbed of all her Abilities except for the Dormant one, she once again turned into the helpless girl he had once guided across the Forgotten Shore… which was both nostalgic and a little heartbreaking to see.

Sunny offered her his arm, and she took it tentatively. Their physical closeness earned him a few scornful looks from the passerby, who seemed ready to beat him up as if he was some kind of despicable philanderer… with a healthy dose of envy mixed into the anger, perhaps.

He was momentarily happy that Cassie could not see these reactions.

Ignoring the idiots, Sunny led her toward the Ivory Island.

'Essence exhaustion…'

Of course, it was the most obvious answer. He just failed to consider it seriously because Cassie, unlike Nephis and Sunny himself, had very rarely driven herself to that state before, if ever.

Which posed the question.

What exactly had made her burn so much essence?

The answer would have to wait until they were in a more private setting, though.

As they walked, Cassie asked quietly:

"Did something happen? I've been told that the King has left for the

waking world. Considering how difficult it seems for him to do so… I assume that Changing Star and the Lord of Shadows had conquered the Citadel."

Sunny lingered with the answer.

Eventually, he said neutrally:

"They did. However, there were complications."

Cassie's grip tightened.

"What… what kind of complications?"

He grimaced.

It was not impossible for Master Sunless to know, but it was definitely a bit strange. Sadly, Cassie seemed to have been too agitated and left him no choice but to answer.

Sunny looked ahead somberly.

"There was… an ambush. Quite a devious one, so much so that it almost ended in disaster. Well, technically, it did. Several Saints of the Sword Army are dead."

He paused for a moment, and added:

"Changing Star and the Lord of Shadows are fine, though."

Cassie let out a shaky breath, then asked somberly:

"How?"

He sighed.

"Four daughters of the Queen, each a Transcendent of divine lineage. And six Reflections. They also…"

Sunny hesitated for a bit before finishing the sentence.

"They also knew too much, while we knew too little. There seems to be a powerful diviner among them, as well as a few talented spies

hiding among us."

His tone was neutral, but it must have sounded like an accusation to Cassie. After all, she was the premier diviner of their small faction — no, of the entire Sword Army. This failure was, in no small part, the result of her personal failure to outperform the oracle of Clan Song… Death Singer, most likely.

It could be easily misjudged as an indictment of her inadequacy.

The delicate young woman grew quiet and did not speak again until they reached the Ivory Tower.

Sunny guided her to her personal quarters. As they were ascending the stairs, Cassie seemed to finally regain a little of her essence. She gently let go of his hand and walked the rest of the way on her own, tracing her fingers across the cold stone of the great pagoda's wall.

Hidden safely in her office and protected from any potential eavesdroppers by a few special Memories, they could finally talk. Luckily, Anvil himself was currently away, as well.

Cassie sat down in her chair and let out a heavy sigh.

"What exactly happened?"

Sunny leaned on the wall and crossed his arms, then said somberly:

"...They went after two Citadels at the same time. The army marched where we expected it to march, but a small team of powerful Saints went directly to our destination instead. They got there faster than us, as well… of course, we don't know if they lost anyone in the process, and how many. However, they killed the Great Terror defending the Citadel and claimed it.

Needless to say, once we entered, we found ourselves inside Ki Song's Domain."

With each word he spoke, Cassie's expression darkened. Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then continued:

"Worse than that, they were prepared to face me and Nephis in

particular. Dark Dancer Revel and Moonveil managed to counter our Aspects almost perfectly. They might not have managed such a feat alone, but with Mordret's Reflections mirroring their powers, it worked. It… was a tough fight. I have not felt that pressured in a long, long while."

He slowly shook his head.

"We managed to drive them away in the end, but not without heavy losses. I even gained quite a valuable boon in the process. Still… it might have gone much better if you had not suffered essence exhaustion at the same time."

Finally, it was his turn to ask the questions.

"What did you do? How did you end up like that in the middle of the warcamp?"

Cassie did not answer immediately, troubled by what he had said.

After a while, she sighed and leaned back in the chair, touching her blindfold briefly.

"You mentioned that there are spies hidden among us."

Sunny nodded.

"I did."

Cassie's expression turned dark.

"I was… interrogating those spies. That was how I spent all my essence."

'Huh.'

He considered her words for a few moments.

"Since when have you become Valor's interrogator?"

A bitter smile twisted her lips. Cassie took a deep breath, then shrugged.

"Since Anvil decided to use me as one, I guess. The situation was… difficult. I don't know how Valor managed to sniff out and capture those spies, but they proved too seasoned and zealous to betray the secrets of their Queen. None of the Memories Valor usually uses to get the truth out of people worked, and their interrogators failed as well.

Torturing these people would have been of no use, and so… I guess the King remembered that I can read people's memories. So, I was summoned."

Sunny scowled.

Cassie's Aspect did, indeed, make her a terrifying entity to those who wanted to keep secrets. However, violating the memories of captive people seemed like quite a vile affair, and one ill-suited for the beautiful Song of the Fallen.

The fact that Anvil had forced her to do something so dirty irked Sunny to no end. Not that he thought that Cassie was above doing such vile things… he was pretty sure that she would stop at nothing to achieve her goals, no matter how brutal or distasteful.

It was just that the King of Swords did not know that, so what right did he have to make such a demand of Cassie?

'That bastard. I'll kill him slowly one day.'

Or swiftly, from the shadows, and stabbing him in the back. Either worked.

Cassie, meanwhile, rubbed the bridge of her nose.

"Reading someone's deep memories against their will can be an… intense process, for me. Especially if their mental resilience is high. That was why I had to expend a lot of essence to get the answers Anvil wanted."

She lingered for a few moments, and then suddenly smiled darkly.

"...But that was not the reason why I exhausted it completely."

Sunny walked over and sat on the chair across from her.

"Oh?"

Cassie nodded.

"No. The real reason is that I used that chance to get the answers I myself wanted. Answers about Song and Valor, which might lead us to learn more about the Sovereigns… perhaps even their weakness."

Her smile faltered, then disappeared.

"And I did. Although… it is only a thread. We will need to keep pulling it to find the truth."

Sunny leaned forward a little.

"And what exactly is that thread?"

Cassie hesitated for a few moments, then raised a hand and pulled her blindfold off.

"It… will be easier if I simply show you."

He frowned, considering the implication of her words.

"You mean?"

She nodded.

"Yes. Before, I took a look at your Memories. Now, I will share mine with you, instead. If... if you'll accept them."

Sunny blinked a couple of times, suddenly reluctant to look in her beautiful eyes.

But then, he forced himself to gaze into them deeply.

His lips twisted into a dark smile.

"Sure. Why not?"

In the next moment, Cassie's eyes changed.

But Sunny once again failed to perceive the nature of that change, because he was suddenly pulled into a strange and stunningly vivid memory.

Chapter-1927: Blind Seer

Sunny had an excellent memory, but Cassie was on an entirely different level. Her memory was simply… absolute. It was incredibly vivid, detailed, and all-encompassing, as if it was impossible for her to forget something even if she wished to.

He knew that it had not always been like this. Cassie's ability to remember everything with perfect clarity had slowly developed as she climbed the Path of Ascension, most likely reaching its current state as a result of Transcendence.

It was bitterly ironic, therefore, that her memory felt fragmented and shrouded in fog.

Being drawn into Cassie's recollection did not mean that Sunny could read her mind — the only thoughts he could sense and hear were those that she remembered thinking, after all. However, he could still feel how burdened she was by the shattered nature of her past.

Great swathes of her life were missing, and that fractured emptiness seeped into the very foundation of her self, making the whole world feel like treacherous quicksand.

Nevertheless, Cassie was undeterred, confidently walking forward despite being unable to look back.

Sunny, though, was far less poised. As soon as the unfamiliar recollection blossomed in his mind, a strong sense of vertigo overcame him, and he swayed. If he wasn't sitting on a chair, he would have probably lost balance entirely.

Cassie's world… was far too overwhelming.

He suspected that she must have been dazed when reliving his own memories — after all, the way Sunny perceived the world was unique

and extraordinary. Not only was his mind split between several incarnations, but he also possessed a sense that humans did not, navigating the world full of shadows.

So, Sunny was not a stranger to complex points of view.

But the way Cassie perceived the world was simply overwhelming in its staggering complexity.

To start with, all her senses were incredibly sharp — many times sharper than that of other Saints, which were already far, far superior to that of mundane humans.

...All senses except for her sight, of course. Cassie's world was a world of darkness, and being blind was a mild shock to Sunny in and of itself. He had experienced being blinded before, but never as a permanent and inseparable part of his existence.

And then, there was more…

Cassie's own point of view was already disorienting enough, but it was not the only one she was living. As she was walking down a stone corridor, she was also perceiving the world through several other people.

There was Nephis, leaving the expedition force of the Sword Army behind to descend into the Hollows. The sweltering heat of Godgrave was pouring from the radiant sky, and drops of sweat were rolling down her lean, powerful body. Then, a wave of harrowing agony washed over her, burning her alive, and two beautiful white wings spread open behind her.

There was Sunny himself and his world of shadows, as well — the impression of his original incarnation was sharp and clear, the other two less so.

There was Jet, standing on a crumbled wall and looking up at the shattered moon, mesmerized by its broken beauty. There were Effie and Kai… and many others, as well.

There was a man in the depths of the government headquarters, watching in numb terror at the wall full of monitors. There was an

Ascended woman fighting for her life in the depths of the scarlet jungle, supported from both sides by her fellow Song soldiers. There was an old man standing over an incandescent crucible, pouring a torrent of essence into the molten steel…

The overwhelming avalanche of sensations flooded Sunny's mind, making all the other perspectives a blur. If not for his experience of casting shadow sense across vast areas, he would have suffered a seizure there and then. As it was, he was only dazed, struggling to find his way in this kaleidoscope of varied lives.

But that was not all, either — the worst was yet to come.

That was because Cassie's own point of view was split between two points in time, as if she was experiencing the present and the near future simultaneously.

And that included the feedback she would receive from her marks in her future, doubling the terrifying flood of knowledge pouring into her mind.

That weight of it was so heavy as to almost be unbearable.

Her ability to sustain it was monstrous.

It took Sunny some time to learn how to not drown in the blind seer's view of the world. Even then, he was barely staying afloat, feeling like a drunk — he limited what he paid attention to and concentrated only on Cassie's own perspective while pushing everything else into the dark corner of his mind.

Cassie was walking down a long stone corridor.

She was blind, and although someone's measured steps were resounding beside her — weighty and metallic, far apart, betraying the person as a tall man wearing armor — his point of view was not among those she shared. Therefore, Cassie was navigating the corridor with the help of her Awakened Ability, which was a disorienting and bizarre experience.

Feeling a shift in the draft blowing through the corridor and knowing that a turn was drawing near, she habitually lowered a hand on the

hilt of the Quiet Dancer.

Suddenly, Sunny was enlightened why Cassie often wore her Echo in a scabbard on her waist, where the habit of resting her hand on its hilt had come from, and why she was still using the temperamental rapier despite how relatively weak it was in comparison to the enemies they usually faced these days.

'...I see. Of course!'

Awakened shared a sort of connection with their Echoes, allowing them to give the sorcerous constructs mental commands. Quiet Dancer, however, turned out to be a bit of a unique Echo — of course it was, considering its unusual nature.

When Cassie held its hilt, their connection deepened, and she was able to vaguely sense what the flying rapier was sensing.

Of course, Quiet Dancer did not perceive the world as a being of flesh and blood would. It had no sight, no hearing, no sense of smell, and no concept of what these notions were. However, it did perceive something — which made sense, really. After all, the Echo did navigate its surroundings with fine precision when flying at great speed and fighting enemies.

Sunny was not sure how, but it had a way of sensing shapes and, especially, motion. So, when Cassie held the Quiet Dancer, she could very vaguely discern shapes and movement, too.

As the man walking by her side turned the corner, she seamlessly followed, managing not to bump into anything and maintain her graceful bearing.

It was when the man said something that Sunny was pulled away from his fascination.

"...therefore, Lady Cassia, you must succeed."

Sunny froze at the sound of the cold, commanding voice. A voice that tolerated no disobedience.

He knew that voice.

And he knew by whose side Cassie was walking, as well.

She lowered her head in a bow and answered respectfully:

"I understand, Your Highness. It will be done."

It was Anvil, the King of Swords.

Pushing a heavy door open, Anvil walked into a cold, damp room and waited for Cassie to follow.

Inside the room…

There was the smell of blood, and the sound of rattling chains as someone moved.

She could feel the prisoner's stare, but there were no words.

Only silence.

Cassie marked one of the guards stationed inside the cell and was finally able to see her surroundings.

In front of her… an old man who had once been dignified was chained to the wall, his clothes soaked with blood. His gaze was calm and heavy.

It took her a moment to recognize him as an elder from one of the Legacy Clans who had pledged their loyalty to Valor.

Nevertheless, the old man had turned out to be a spy of the Song Domain.

Chapter-1928: Dawn of a New Era

The old man possessed a formidable mind — which was not surprising, really. As a member of the First Generation, he had endured the darkest era of humanity, facing countless dreadful ordeals and overcoming them with great tenacity and determination.

The fact that he had lived to his respectable age was proof enough of just how much willpower he possessed.

However, today, the old man encountered an ordeal that he would not be able to overcome...

It was Cassie.

Kneeling near the bloodied prisoner, she pulled off her blindfold and looked him into the eyes — of course, Cassie had marked him already, so what she actually saw was herself.

The old man smiled darkly, and finally spoke.

"Song of the Fallen. I've heard about you."

She responded quietly:

"And I you, Master Orum."

She knew that he might attempt to commit suicide if given enough time — in fact, he would have done so already if the nature of her Aspect had not been a closely guarded secret. So, there was little time to waste, especially considering that there were several other captured spies she would have to interrogate later.

But this one… this one was more valuable to Cassie, because he had

lived a long life, and would know many secrets that had nothing to do with the clandestine side of the Domain War.

Looking into the man's eyes, Cassie activated her Transcendent Ability.

Master Orum's formidable mental defences crumbled easily under her tyrannical attack…

After that, Sunny experienced something very strange. He was reliving Cassie's memory, who in turn was reliving the memories of the old man. If anything, it was a relief, since Master Orum was very much human — his point of view was infinitely less crushing than her own.

The recent memories were the easiest to access. The fear, the pain, the despair of being caught… but below it all, an eerie sense of calm and cold determination, as if he had been prepared to meet such an end all along.

Deeper than these fresh experiences were the memories of the war. The span of time was too great, and Master Orum's memory was not much different from a mundane human, many details of his recent past already erased by the passage of time — Cassie somehow sifted through the vast volume of random recollections, zeroing in on only the most important ones.

She completed the royal order with relative ease, finding the details of Orum's clandestine activity. How long he had been relaying information to Song, what methods he used, which secrets he had shared, who were his contacts in the Sword Army... and so on.

It was eerie and frightening, how easily she had learned his most precious secrets, and how helpless the stalwart old man was in front of her.

However, even after learning everything the King of Swords wanted to know, Cassie showed no sign of having achieved her goal. Instead, she kept looking into Orum's eyes, diving deeper into his memories… deeper, deeper, and deeper still, until his whole life was laid open in front of her like a book.

There were too many pages in that book to read them all, but some were more solid and important than others. They were his core memories, as well as those memories that had just got stuck in his mind for one reason or another, sometimes for no reason at all.

Even these were too numerous for her to fathom in a short span of time, without revealing her secret actions to the onlookers. So, Cassie focused even more, her mind spinning on all cylinders to find the pieces of precious information she desperately wanted to know.

And there, finally… she discovered something.

In the next moment, Sunny was transported into an old, old memory. Despite its age, however, it was incredibly sharp and vivid, hinting at how important these events were to Master Orum.

And only a few seconds later, Sunny understood why.

***

The city was on fire, and acrid smoke shrouded the streets. Military vehicles lay on the melting asphalt like corpses of metallic beasts, their armor bent and torn to shreds. Here and there, human corpses were sprawled on the ground, as well, gruesomely mutilated and surrounded by pools of blood.

Screams of terror were echoing in the smoke, drowning in the inhuman cacophony of bestial roars.

"Orie! Orie!"

Orum — a slender young man on the cusp of adulthood — had been running for his life, overcome by pain and despair. At the sound of a childish voice calling out to him, however, he stopped and turned around.

His little sister, whom he had been dragging along, was sprawled on the ground a dozen meters away, having fallen a few moments ago.

For a moment, cold fear flooded his mind.

He… he had not even noticed when her hand slipped out of his.

Limping back in a hurry, he picked her up from the ground and wiped tears out of her eyes.

"It's alright. It's alright. Come on, we have to…"

At that moment, a hideous figure lunged at them from the smoke, frenzied madness burning in its terrifying eyes.

It was one of the infected… or whatever these demons were.

Orum froze.

…Luckily, his body moved even if his mind was paralyzed. It pushed his sister back and whipped an arm forward — a senseless gesture, considering how powerful and unstoppable the infected were.

However, Orum had been one of these infected not too long ago.

He had not turned into a monster, though. Instead, he had dreamed of a terrible place, fighting for his life in a dreadful land where gods and demons were real, and humans possessed unbelievable powers. When he awoke, he brought parts of that dream with him.

As the infected was about to tear into his flesh, the asphalt beneath it suddenly parted, and then closed like stone jaws, crushing the creature's bones and trapping it.

Orum fell back, trembling, and pulled a military handgun — the one he had picked up from a soldier's corpse a few minutes before — from the pocket of his torn jacket.

Aiming it at the infected, he disengaged the safety and repeatedly pulled the trigger.

His aim was so bad that only seven rounds out of twelve actually hit the monster despite the close distance. Out of those, three had ricocheted off the creature's adamantine skull… but the remaining four were mercifully enough to kill it.

The infected slumped, and Orum shuddered when a ghostly voice resounded in his head:

[You have slain a Dormant Beast, Carrion Beast.]

[You have received a Memory.]

Lowering the empty gun, Orum belatedly realized that he had forgotten to search for spare magazines on the soldier's corpse. He had no bullets left.

How were they going to survive?

How... how was anyone going to survive?

All around young Orum and his sister…

The world was coming to an end.

Chapter-1929: First Generation

The shock of having killed an infected rattled Orum. He had slain several monsters in that strange dream of his… but those were monsters in the dream. The hideous creature in front of him had been a human once, and they were in the real world.

Monsters had no place in the real world.

…But killers had.

After all, the real world was not that different from a nightmare.

Wiping his sweat, he turned away, pulled his sister close, and shielded her from the gruesome sight.

'We can't stay still. We need to get away from this district before the fire spreads.'

"Orie…"

He looked at his sister and forced out a smile.

"It's fine. I'm not hurt. It's… it's all going to be fine."

He remembered hearing the ghostly voice say that he had received something… some kind of memory. That was not the first time he had heard these words, but their meaning escaped him.

He was certain that he would not forget these terrible days for as long as he was alive, but wasn't it natural to retain the memories of what happened to you? Why had the voice felt the need to announce such a strange thing?

Gritting his teeth, Orum stood up, gasped at the pain in his wounded leg, then picked up his sister and started to limp away. The rag he had used to bandage the wound was already soaked in blood, which

was now pooling in his shoe. Ignoring the repulsive sensation, he hurried his steps.

Then, hearing another howl, he ignored the pain and ran.

Orum ran as fast as he could — which was incredibly fast, compared to what he had been capable of just a few days ago. His body had grown unbelievably strong after the strange dream, reaching a pinnacle of what humans should be capable of. It was all very magical.

And yet, it wasn't enough.

Pretty soon, Orum stopped, looking around in desperation.

They were on a wide intersection, surrounded by burning tanks. There… there was nowhere to run, anymore.

That was because several infected had been feasting on the corpses of the soldiers that littered the ground here, and were now staring at him with bestial eyes. Several more were rushing from behind, only a few seconds away from catching up.

Orum held his sister tighter, not knowing what to do.

No, he knew what he had to do. He had to fight. It was just that fighting these monsters was suicide, even if he still had the gun.

Or… he could try to escape. Alone. If he lost the pack of supplies weighing him down… as well as his sister…

He shuddered, revolted and loathing himself for the momentary thought.

He would not leave his sister behind, ever, and that meant… that meant that both of them were going to die here.

Orum slowly lowered the little girl to the ground, then picked up a length of iron pipe that lay nearby, slightly bent and heavy in his grip.

If he was going to die, then he would die fighting. He would die

taking as many of these monsters with him as he could.

However…

Orum did not die.

Just when the infected were prepared to lunge at him, something whistled in the air, and the head of one of the infected exploded.

A split second later, another fell to the ground, and then one more.

Each was hit directly in the eye.

He shook off his shock and raised the ground in front of them akin to a wall, the cracked asphalt scattering into the air. The wall shuddered when two monstrous creatures crashed into it, producing an appalling sound of breaking bones.

Orum toppled the wall of earth onto them and raised his pipe, bringing it down on the cracked skull of the first creature to emerge from beneath the debris.

The ghostly voice whispered into his ear again:

[You have slain…]

He killed the second infected, as well, although that one took several blows.

By then, their pursuers were already upon them — or rather, they were sprawled on the ground, blood flowing from jagged holes in their heads.

Orum tiredly lowered his pipe, took his sister's hand, and looked around in confusion.

A few moments later, he froze.

Someone had walked out of the smoke. It was a beautiful young woman in dark military clothes, visibly one or two sizes too large for her frame. She had gorgeous raven-black hair and a confident gaze, using a high-powered magnetic rifle as a walking stick to help her

walk.

And she needed the help, because she… she seemed to be late into her pregnancy. Her belly protruded forward like a ripe fruit, and she was using her other hand to support it.

Orum recognized her as his savior and bowed hurriedly.

"Th—thank you…"

The young woman glanced at him, then hung the rifle over her shoulder and outstretched a hand. His eyes widened when a scary-looking hunting knife appeared in it, seemingly out of thin air.

She studied him for a moment, then smiled lightly.

"What's your name, boy?"

Orum gulped.

"It's… it's Orie."

She nodded, then smiled wider and offered him the strange knife.

"Well, what are you waiting for? We need to get the shards before more of them appear. And it's a bit hard for me to bend down, at the moment… so..."

He stared at her in incomprehension.

"The… the shards? What shards? Wait, where did this knife come from? How did you…"

The young woman blinked a couple of times.

"Right. I guess not everyone has figured these things out inside the trial. Well, worry not, Orie… I'll explain to you what a soul shard is, what a Memory is, and how to survive the end of the world."

She lingered for a moment, and then added with a smile:

"Oh, I'm Jiwon, by the way... Song Jiwon."

She patted her belly.

"And this little bean is my future daughter. She'll be a real princess, no doubt…"

Chapter-1930: Bright Future

'That... is Ki Song's mother.'

As Sunny thought that, surprised, the memory dissolved into the stream of Cassie's consciousness, and another one surfaced.

Orum, now an Awakened, was standing at the edges of a crowded square in NQSC. His figure was more muscular, and his posture was upright and confident — a far cry from the skinny refugee youth he had been once.

He had survived the end of the world… mostly thanks to Song Jiwon, who had taught him how to harvest soul shards, absorb them to grow stronger, summon the runes to learn about his Aspect and Attributes, manifest Memories, and much more.

On that day many years ago, they had fought their way out of the flood of the infected… the Nightmare Creatures, as they were called now… and then joined a caravan of other survivors, escaping across the desolate wasteland toward the Northern Quadrant Siege Capital.

Song Jiwon — now known as Ravenheart — was also responsible for the fact that he had survived the winter solstice a few months later. They parted ways after that, thrown into different corners of the Dream Realm by the Nightmare Spell, but Orum often thought about his savior and wondered how she was doing now.

And her daughter, who had been born soon after the two of them Awakened.

That was why he had been glad to have stumbled into her today, out of the blue.

Ravenheart had not changed much. She was still easygoing and confident, quick to smile, and a little mysterious… it was only that

there seemed to be a hint of heaviness hidden deep in her beautiful eyes now, and she seemed more mature.

"Take this."

She handed him a snack from a street vendor — the same synthpaste cake everyone was having, powdered by an excessive amount of artificial spices — and looked at the huge projection towering above the crowd in the middle of the square.

On it, a solemn ceremony was taking place.

Orum received the snack with gratitude and looked at the screen as well. Ravenheart took a bite, grimaced, and then pointed at the projection.

"Oh, I recognize some of those guys. Let's see — the one who looks like he only has one expression should be good old Warden of Valor… he's not that bad, actually, just terribly stiff. The handsome devil next to him is Immortal Flame. Then… goodness gracious, is that who I think it is? That must be him. Nightwalker… so the rumors are true!

He does exist. Let me see, who else…"

There were more renowned warriors beside them.

The people whose image was projected above the crowd were the best and the brightest humanity had to offer… the militant heroes of the new era. Everyone had fought relentlessly to make sure that the world did not fall apart, of course, but these remarkable individuals had carved their names into history.

And now, they were about to do it again.

Orum glanced at Ravenheart and asked, feeling a little self-conscious:

"You know them?"

She shook her head.

"No, not really. Small people like us rarely get the chance to brush

sides with the big guys, don't we?"

He smiled.

Ravenheart was being falsely modest. Sure, her fame was nowhere near someone like the Warden or Immortal Flame, but she was far from ordinary. After all, she was one of the rare individuals who had earned a True Name from the Spell, as well.

One of the people in the projection, meanwhile, was finishing a speech.

"...but we endured. We survived. We thrived! The Nightmare Creatures are now fully eradicated across countless cities, and we have reclaimed our planet. However… it is still too early to celebrate. There are still many more cities that must be liberated, and many more people that need to be saved.

And so, to achieve this glorious goal and protect humanity from the perils of the uncertain future…"

The speaker took a dramatic pause, and then finished with a bright smile:

"I am proud to announce the formation of the United Human Government!"

The crowd exploded with applause and cheers.

The old countries were gone, and in the chaos of the new era, the survivors had been united around local powerhouses — mostly Awakened champions. There was a lot of cooperation between various stronghold cities, especially recently… in no small part because those same powerhouses were often fighting side by side in the Dream Realm when they slept.

So, this was welcome news. People felt as if a semblance of stability was returning to the world.

Ravenheart clapped her hands together, as well.

"Good. Things were getting crazy in some parts of the world lately…

both worlds, I mean. There are all kinds of lunatics out there, some holding significant power. This new United Government will probably push them out, slowly but surely."

Orum nodded.

"Yeah. I'm just glad that some kind of universal order will be established. Honestly, I felt like we'd devolve back to feudalism for a while."

He was actually powerful enough to become a feudal lord himself… a small-time lord, perhaps, but a lord nonetheless. Still, that was not the world he wanted his sister to grow up in.

Ravenheart gave him a curious look.

"I mean… we probably still will. But at least this new feudalism will have a nice veneer and a sleek PR department."

With that, she finished her snack and headed away from the square.

"Come on, Orie. The whole city will be celebrating today… we should have some fun while we can, shouldn't we?"

Orum chuckled, threw one last glance at the projection, and followed.

"Sure. Just the two of us?"

Ravenheart flashed him a smile.

"Actually, I had one more person in mind…"

Half an hour later, Orum found himself looking at a shy, incredibly sweet little girl hiding behind her mother and throwing cautious glances at him.

He blinked.

"Is that you, Little Ki? Gods, when did you get so big?!"

The last time he saw her, she was a tiny, wrinkled infant swaddled in

a bundle of cloth.

So many people had died during the first months of the Nightmare Spell that simply surviving was seen as a great accomplishment. Surviving while being pregnant, like Ravenheart did, was nothing short of a miracle… as well as a testament to how exceptional she was.

So, this little girl's life was a miracle. She had been born and survived against all odds.

But it was only looking at her now, grown up and resembling an actual human, that Orum finally felt it.

How far they had come…

And that the world was not ending anymore.

That they had saved it.

Looking at the shy little girl, he smiled.

"What, don't you remember your Uncle Orie? Ah, I'm hurt. I was there when you were a tiny little baby, you know…"

He couldn't help but wonder what future awaited this sweet child.

Surely, she would live a long life. Her future will be warm, bright, and full of happiness…

Chapter-1931: Torch Bearer

'He actually did it.'

Today was another day of celebration, but Orum remembered too much, and felt too much, to share in the excitement that had seemingly taken the entire world by storm.

He was dressed in his best clothes, standing in the grand assembly hall of the UHG headquarters. The somber space had been transformed into a lavishly decorated venue for the occasion, and there was a lively crowd enjoying the generous banquet — those who wielded power over humanity and the members of their families, all dressed to the nines and glowing with joy.

Orum should have probably felt pride in being one of them, but he was not in the right mood.

He was not young anymore. He was also not an inexperienced greenhorn who barely knew how to kill a Nightmare Creature. Instead, he was one of the most renowned Awakened in the Waking World, ruling a Citadel of his own in the Dream Realm… his status was not as high as that of the brilliant heroes who had become the idols of humanity, perhaps, but not far below them.

That was why Orum felt frozen and somber in the middle of the joyful celebration.

There were others like him, as well — mostly those who had endured the horrors of the Nightmare Spell from the very first day of its descent.

That was because they understood better than anyone what today's ceremony meant, and how many lives had been lost to pave the road for it.

Today… they were celebrating Immortal Flame, the fiery champion of humanity, who had done something they all considered impossible.

Who had conquered the Second Nightmare.

Orum raised a crystal glass to his lips and took a sip of the liquid inside, not feeling its taste.

Immortal Flame was not the first Awakened who had responded to the Call and led a cohort into a Seed of Nightmare… in fact, many had tried before, some burning with ambition, some simply unable to resist the Call anymore. It was just that none of them had returned alive — Orum had lost plenty of friends that way, their absence leaving deep scars on his heart.

Some people still held hope, but most had long given up on Ascendance.

Immortal Flame had changed everything. His impossible feat shook the very foundation of the established world order, and would inevitably and completely change the future... Orum was sure of it.

The news had been announced only a few days ago, and everywhere he went, he could already hear cautious whispers of trying to challenge the Nightmares again. He was even tempted to consider it himself… but no, he couldn't. He had a family to take care of. Maybe later, when his niece passed the age of becoming a Dreamer…

But still.

'Ascendance…'

Immortal Flame himself was not in the assembly hall, whisked away by other powerhouses to hold a closed-door meeting, but Orum had met him briefly when entering the venue. Of course, he could not tell how much more powerful the man had become, exactly, but it was impossible to mistake him for an Awakened.

Just like a Fallen abomination was incomparable to an Awakened one, an Ascended human should be an invincible existence to people like Orum. Which was both disquieting and reassuring.

Steeling his wildly beating heart, he gulped down his drink and let out a shaky breath.

'We all owe Immortal Flame. What he did… proves that conquering the Nightmares is possible.'

Which was an invaluable blessing, considering its necessity.

Most people did not know, but Orum was high enough in the hierarchy of humanity to have a good rapport with the UHG.

Having access to its information network, as well as one of his own, he knew that the rumors about a greater Gate opening in the Eastern Quadrant were not rumors at all… in fact, several of these terrifying rifts had opened across the world in the last couple of years, far more devastating than any before, and countless lives had been lost.

After the Nightmare Spell descended, people had thought that the world was saved for a few years. He still remembered the elation and optimism of those precious days… however, they had not lasted long.

Soon, the Nightmare Gates started opening, and their lives had turned to fear and bloodshed once more. And now, the Gates were growing more potent… there was already a classification system proposed, designating these new rifts as those of the Third Category. Although nothing had been proven yet, three more Categories were theorized, up to a Category Six Gate.

…Or maybe even Category Seven.

What would such horror look like, Orum did not know, and could not imagine.

He did know one thing, though. It was that there would be nothing but chilling escalation in the future, with more terrifying beings entering the Waking World each year. If humans wanted to survive, they would have to keep up with the tyranny of the Nightmare Spell, as well.

That was why what Immortal Flame had achieved was so important.

Not even because he was the first human to become Ascended, but

because he had proven that conquering a Nightmare was possible. That Ascension was just another step on a long and winding path to salvation… the path of Ascension.

Immortal Flame had given them hope.

Orum placed his glass on a nearby table and went to the far side of the hall, planning to hide his heavy thoughts behind a plate of snacks.

He was still pondering the dire future when his concentration was broken by infectious laughter.

Looking down, he saw a group of children doing what children usually did during the gatherings of adults — being bored and finding their own fun wherever they could.

Among them, one girl especially attracted attention. She was maybe six or seven years old, wearing a frilly gown that made her look like a little princess and a smile so bright and radiant that even Orum's own lips curved upward slightly.

At the moment, the girl was dragging a serious boy of the same age by the hand, saying something boisterously:

"...come on, Vale! I really saw an Echo. It's just outside!"

The boy pursed his lips, unhappy.

"But Madoc said that I must stay here."

The girl scoffed.

"What does he know! Why is he ordering you around, anyway? He's only a year older than us!"

Orum recognized the cute pair. The boy was the younger son of the Warden. The girl… would probably be the daughter of Immortal Flame himself.

He sighed and looked away with a smile.

'Little monsters…'

Orum had never become a father himself, but he was helping raise his niece. There had been a time when he thought that the children of the new era would grow up knowing nothing but peace and warmth… but fate was cruel. Instead, they grew up surrounded by terror, blood, monsters, loss, and death.

They had been raised in the world of the Nightmare Spell, and as a result, they were far more fierce and feral than the children of his own era.

Thinking about that, he looked up and froze.

There, separated from the group of boisterous kids, stood another girl… this one a couple years older and a little gloomy. No one seemed very interested in speaking with her, so she was all alone, holding to the dull fabric of her far less opulent dress awkwardly.

Orum paid no attention to her clothes, however.

He only looked at her face, which was painfully familiar.

It took him a few moments to remember whom she reminded him of.

The girl… was the spitting image of her mother.

Forgetting everything, Orum couldn't help but walk closer and ask, his voice hiding suppressed emotion:

"...Little Ki?"

Chapter-1932: Second Generation

Orum had not seen Ravenheart and her daughter often since that day they spent together in NQSC.

They were living in turbulent and tumultuous times, and he had had family matters to deal with back then. Later, his focus shifted to the Dream Realm. He pursued his ambitions and eventually conquered a Citadel of his own, wishing to build a livelihood for himself and his family.

Awakened were naturally grouped together by the region of the Dream Realm they traveled to at night. Ravenheart was simply too far away, in a place where few others had been sent by the Nightmare Spell. She was not very sociable, either, so the two of them had grown distant, eventually losing contact altogether.

He used to hear about her from time to time, feeling happy to know that she was doing fine. Ravenheart's life seemed quite tough, considering how remote and dangerous her corner of the Dream Realm was. There were not many Awakened there, and even less Citadels — unlike the region where Orum himself was anchored.

People there had rallied around the impressive Citadel of the Warden of Valor, which was now a bastion of humanity in the dangerous alien world. It almost seemed like it was the center of the Dream Realm, with everything else existing on the periphery.

Well, there were the elusive Nightwalker and other unfortunate souls who had found themselves in a nebulous sea, of course, as well as isolated Citadels scattered here and there across the vast expanse of the Dream Realm. Considering its nature, it was hard to even establish where they were located in relation to more populated areas, let alone carve a path to them.

The last Orum heard about Ravenheart, she had conquered a Citadel somewhere far north, near a colossal mountain chain that stretched from east to west as far as humans explored.

Preoccupied with other things, he had not thought of her for many years.

But now, seeing her daughter, the memories of all the time they had spent together flooded his mind.

Orum felt nostalgia, tenderness, bittersweet wistfulness… and shame.

Ravenheart had done so much for him, but he never paid her back. Instead, he had simply forgotten about her, too busy with his own affairs and the complexities of life.

Little Ki — who had grown up a lot — looked up at him and frowned in confusion.

It seemed that she once again did not remember who he was.

Still dazed a little, Orum offered her a smile.

"I'm Awakened Orum… Uncle Orie. I'm a friend of your mom."

There was no hint of recognition in her eyes.

The girl shifted awkwardly, her gloomy face untouched by a smile.

"Oh… it is nice to meet you, Awakened Orum."

He hesitated, not knowing what to say, then suddenly looked around.

"Is your mother here?"

Little Ki… although he would probably have to stop calling her that soon… shook her head.

"No… mom's Citadel is situated in a dangerous region of the Dream Realm, and many people use it as shelter. Since they need her protection, she spends most of her time sleeping."

She lingered for a few moments, then added stiffly:

"Mom told me to spend more time with children of other Awakened families, though, so I accepted the invitation on her behalf. To represent our family."

There was a hint of pride in her last words, which prompted Orum to look at her closely.

"You don't seem to be spending time with other children, though."

Little Ki's eyes widened.

"Well! That… that… I will approach them in due time. I'm just gathering my thoughts."

Orum smiled, having a suspicion about why Ravenheart had told her daughter to socialize with other kids more.

"Are you having a hard time?"

Little Ki gave him a long look, then sighed.

"...A little."

Then, she added bitterly:

"They all know each other, already. Plus, the families of other Named Awakened are all… are all… better off than we are. When I introduced myself, they just said hi and lost interest immediately."

Orum suppressed a wince.

The families of people like Immortal Flame and the Warden were indeed a bit of an exclusive club. They had to be, considering how many sycophants sought out their favor, often with little or no sincerity.

He regretted that his niece wasn't here… although she was much younger than this shunned girl. Little Ki would probably not be interested in spending time with a baby, either.

He remained silent for a few moments, then smiled again.

"I was on my way to get some snacks… do you want to come with me? After all, it is far easier to endure these events on a full stomach. Plus, I want to know more about how your mom is doing. We are from the same hometown, you know? In fact, I wouldn't be alive today if it wasn't for her. My sister, too.

Come to think about it, I absolutely must tell you all about how she rescued us — after all, it would be a crime if you didn't know how amazing your mother is…"

Finally, the familiar shy smile appeared on the gloomy girl's face.

"Oh… alright. But I already know how amazing she is…"

Orum spent some time with Little Ki, talking about Ravenheart and the early days of the Nightmare Spell. She was still the same sweet child underneath the veneer of gloominess, which made him happy. In the process, he introduced her to a few people and helped her mix in with the crowd. Her awkwardness receded, and she eventually left his side to talk to a few kids from the less influential families.

He was quite glad at the chance to help his benefactor's daughter, even if it was in such a small way.

There was a small smile on his lips.

'I hope my sister's little troublemaker gets to know her one day.'

After that day, though, life became turbulent once again. Immortal Flame's achievement had made an enormous splash, and a tidal wave of change rattled the entire world. Those changes were especially poignant for Awakened like him.

Soon, more Ascended — called Masters now — emerged. The existence of the Category Three Gates was revealed, plunging humanity into chaos for a while.

Eventually, Orum started to make tentative preparations, planning on challenging the Second Nightmare himself.

In all that turmoil, he had not thought about little Ki Song a lot.

Until the day came when he regretted it bitterly.

That was because, by then, the first generation of children born after the descent of the Nightmare Spell reached the age that allowed them to become infected by it.

And Awakened like him quickly discovered that the children of those who had passed the trial of the Spell were much more likely to become its victims.

Chapter-1933: Legacy

Several years later, Orum found himself standing at the edges of a desolate lot, watching massive construction machines moving some distance away. A tall alloy wall had been raised near the outer radius of NQSC, enclosing a vast space. The city had been quite crowded lately, with many people even having to settle outside the barriers… how they survived out there, he could not imagine. But they did.

So, the value of this plot of land was astronomical — it could be measured in human lives, after all.

The construction was nearing the end. The wall was mostly complete, the moat in front of it had been dug. Fearsome turrets were already installed atop the rampart, although none had been brought online yet. It looked like a fortress ready to repel an attack by a titan.

As he watched, a large group of Awakened used their inhuman strength to hoist an immense alloy gate up — painted red, it stood out starkly against the dull metallic surface of the wall. A swarm of construction workers rappelled down a few moments later, ready to guide the enormous slab of red alloy into a complicated locking mechanism.

"When gods close a door, the Nightmare Spell opens a window…"

Hearing someone speak beside him, Orum turned his head in surprise. He had not felt anyone's presence there before. Considering how sharp his instincts were, sneaking up on him was a difficult task — and yet, someone seemed to have managed to do just that.

'Disconcerting.'

Orum noted the slurred words and the drunken giggle that followed the sudden proclamation, then smelled alcohol in the air. He frowned.

There, just a step away from him, a dishevelled man in expensive clothes was leaning on a wall, holding a mostly empty bottle of liquor in his hand. There was a snide smile on his lips, and a strange expression in his cold, cold eyes.

Orum looked away and smiled.

"I didn't know that it was possible for a Master to get drunk. Are you pulling a prank on me, Ascended Jest?"

The man turned to him and grinned.

"Yo, Awakened Orum! Funny to run into you here."

Orum pursed his lips.

He knew Jest rather well, and although the two of them were on friendly terms, the man always made him feel uncomfortable. Everyone was aware what role that Jest played in Warden's cohort, and how many people had died by his hand... plenty of fringe factions had been quietly eliminated to restore the order in the world, after all.

Despite his carefree attitude and humorous appearance, the man had quite a twisted and sinister side.

Jest turned to the towering alloy wall and asked, his voice curious:

"Have you come to take a look too, Orum? Awakened Academy… what a grand name! Ah, but these lazy bastards… the opening is in a few days, and they haven't even finished setting up the defense systems."

He sighed.

"Well, on the other hand. Some might say that they're right on time."

The Awakened Academy was a project that had been forced on the government by the factions of several renowned Masters.

Or rather, the government was forced to make it a priority — there had always been plans of creating a centralized education facility to

newly infected carriers of the Nightmare Spell and the younger Awakened, but considering how difficult and complicated the logistics of such an endeavor were, it always ended up on the backburner. Until now.

That was because almost eighteen years had passed since the descent of the Spell, and the children of many original Awakened were swiftly approaching the age that would allow them to be infected.

In fact, some already had been.

Much worse, the rate of infection among the relatives of Awakened had been proven to be much higher than among the general population. The grim news had shaken the Awakened a great deal.

So, those in power had finally taken off the gloves and showed the government in no uncertain terms what its place was.

Jest looked at the alloy wall somberly, the smile slowly disappearing from his face.

"You must have heard, right? Old Valor's youngest boy is infected. Immortal Flame's girl, too… and so many others. They'll be the first class of the Awakened Academy."

Orum remained silent for a few moments.

"What about your kids?"

Jest smiled.

"Nope, my kids aren't infected. My youngest is not of age yet. My oldest… he's dead. He didn't pass the first trial, so he's technically not infected anymore. There. This Academy has nothing to do with me."

As Orum looked away with a sigh, Jest took another sip of liquor and laughed.

"Ain't it a joke, Orum? The nightmare… it never ends. All the dirty things we've done, and it's only getting worse. Worse, and worse, and worse… ah, it's hilarious."

He looked down, his gaze turning cold once again.

"Your sister's children are what, around ten? You must be thinking about a lot of things right now, too. Huh, Orum?"

Orum nodded slowly.

"Yeah. I am thinking… I really hope that they won't become infected. Of course, I'll need to prepare them well, in case they do."

Everyone would probably be thinking the same, at the moment. The Awakened Academy was one thing, but the entire education system would have to be reworked. There were more and more infection cases every year, so it was not enough to teach children literature, sciences, and basic self-defense anymore. They needed to be taught how to survive, how to fight, and how to kill…

Which, in turn, would make them even sharper and more cruel than they already were.

Jest smiled again.

"...That is why I like you, Orum. Thank the gods you're still normal, at least."

His expression changed again, growing cold and resentful. At this point, it was unclear if he was really drunk or just pretending — in any case, Jest uttered through gritted teeth, his voice full of contempt:

"Do you know what the others are thinking, though?"

Orum silently shook his head.

Jest smiled darkly.

"They are praying for their children to be infected and carry on their legacy. There's talk about dynasties, control over Citadels, and consolidating power everywhere. Well, I get it… fools like us have grown used to our lofty status, and that status only exists because of strength. If our children remain mundane, it will disappear like dew after we die. There'll be no legacy."

Orum looked at him, unamused.

"I'd rather not leave a legacy, then."

Jest simply laughed.

"As if you have a choice. Orum, my friend, listen to this fool… abandon hope. In this era, the only thing worth believing in is the Nightmare Spell, and the Spell is a cruel bitch. Just… teach your kids well. Teach them really well, bastard."

With that, he finished his liquor, waved a hand weakly, and headed away.

"See you at the opening ceremony, Orum! Old Valor is giving a speech… ah, I love the scumbag, but he is so dreadfully boring. And yet, he refuses to accept the jokes I wrote for him! Honestly, I'd skip the entire thing if I were you…"

Orum watched him go in silence, his gaze heavy.

Despite the piece of friendly advice, he did attend the opening ceremony of the Awakened Academy a few days later.

It was there that he met Ki Song once again…

Chapter-1934: First Class

The turrets on the massive wall were still being calibrated by an army of technicians, but the Academy was already welcoming its first crop of young Dreamers. This late in the year, there were a considerable number of them — almost five hundred.

Some had come from here in NQSC, some had arrived from other cities in the Northern Quadrant. Many had even been brought across the oceans on heavily armored naval convoys — not only from Africa, Antarctica, and Australia, but also from the Americas. It was a clear sign of how seriously the government was taking the establishment of the Academy.

There were many distinguished guests, as well. Orum was one of them, observing the ceremony silently. Jest had not shown up, which was probably for the best, but he saw a lot of familiar faces.

Warden of Valor did indeed give a speech… and it was indeed a little boring. Filtering out the man's stern voice, Orum looked at the young Dreamers.

They had already done well to survive the First Nightmare. In fact, there were much more survivors this year than ever before. It was most likely because the kids infected by the Spell this year had all been born after its descent, and grew up in its ruthless claws. They were a different breed.

Honestly, Orum sometimes felt scared of the new generation.

In any case, there was another trial waiting for them now. The winter solstice was not that far, and soon, they would be sent to the Dream Realm. How many would be left alive? He hoped that all of them would, but of course, his wish was not meant to come true.

At least the impressive roster of instructors employed by the

Academy would be able to prepare them for the journey better. Naturally, those instructors were not Awakened of the highest caliber, but they were competent enough to earn his trust.

He recognized a few of the Sleepers, as well.

The tall youth with a cold expression was Anvil, Old Valor's son. He gave off an unapproachable impression and was easily noticeable because of his flawless poise and composure. His dark hair was cut neatly, and his gaze was sharp… unlike most of the Sleepers, who seemed traumatized by their Nightmares and frightened of the solstice, he was calm and collected.

As if he was born to carry the Nightmare Spell.

The youngest son of Valor was not the center of attention, though. Instead, it was a beautiful young woman standing next to him, wearing an easy smile on her lips. She was like a ray of sunshine in the somber atmosphere of the underground hall, attracting many furtive gazes from other youths.

She was Smile of Heaven, Immortal Flame's daughter… and already a trailblazer, just like her father. After all, she was the first human to have earned a True Name in the First Nightmare. Her future was undoubtedly bright.

Orum vaguely remembered seeing these two a few years ago, when they were still little kids. Now, both were sixteen, and already tempered by the cruelty of the Nightmare Spell.

To his surprise, though…

There was someone else who drew his attention. He did not know this youth, and couldn't place him. The young man did not look like a child from any of the powerful families that had emerged since the descent of the Spell…

Unlike Anvil and Smile of Heaven, the youth was wearing cheap clothes that were most of the way to becoming rags. He had black hair and piercing grey eyes, his gaze strangely heated. There was a quality of sharpness about him that only those who had witnessed a

lot possessed, but also a hint of gentleness that was both endearing and out of place.

Orum's instincts told him that the youth was special in some way, but he couldn't quite put a finger on it.

'Ah. I see.'

He finally understood why the young man stood out among his peers, and smiled slightly.

It was because everyone else was trying to hide their glances, but the youth was staring at Smile of Heaven brazenly.

'What a brave fellow.'

Shaking his head, Orum looked away and threw another look at the sea of youthful faces.

Then, he froze for a moment.

There was another familiar face in the crowd, quite far from the center of attention. One that he knew far better than that of Valor's son or Immortal Flame's daughter.

'Little Ki…'

A dull pain pierced Orum's heart.

She was a couple of years older than the other two, at the edge of the age susceptible to the plunder of the Nightmare Spell.

She had almost been safe.

Her youthful awkwardness was gone, replaced by quiet confidence. The hint of gloominess remained, though.

Orum gritted his teeth and looked away.

'...Of course.'

Her mother was such an outstanding Awakened, after all. If even his niece and nephews were at risk, then Little Ki would be, too.

He sighed heavily.

'It's alright.'

She was Ravenheart's daughter. An apple did not fall far from the tree, and her mother would have prepared her well.

Little Ki had already survived her First Nightmare, proving that she was strong enough to endure the cruelty of the Nightmare Spell. Yes, her future would be one of bloodshed and peril, like that of all Awakened… but Orum had been living this life for a while, and he was fine.

Surely, she would be fine, too.

Her mother ruled a Citadel in the Dream Realm. Although the Song family was not very renowned, it was still one of the most distinguished families of the modern era. Little Ki had plenty of advantages to help her survive both in the Waking World and in the Dream Realm.

And he had his own problems to deal with. Too many of them to waste time on the child of an old acquaintance…

Soon, the ceremony was over. The Sleepers were taken to their dormitories by the attendants, and the distinguished guests were guided to a banquet hall.

Orum found himself in the middle of a celebration once again. He did not attempt to socialize with his peers, though, standing in the corner with a somber expression.

Eventually, he found his way to the center of the hall, where a small crowd was gathered around an exalted figure.

"...Congratulations, sir!"

"Your son has definitely inherited his father's valiance."

"How goes the struggle against the Dark Forest? I haven't visited Bastion in a while…"

Orum patiently made his way through the circle of sycophants and bowed slightly.

"Ascended Warden."

The man — Warden of Valor — looked at him in confusion for a moment, then smiled slightly.

"Awakened Orum. It is nice to see you again… how is your Citadel doing? If that Fallen Demon is still causing trouble in your territory, I can send some of my knights to assist you."

Orum smiled politely.

"Thank you, but I have dealt with it already. Rather, I wanted to talk to you regarding something else…"

Warden's smile brightened a little, and he patted Orum on the shoulder.

"You took down a Fallen Demon, Orum? As expected… great! That is what an Awakened should strive to be."

He threw a derisive glance at the other people around them, then looked back to Orum.

"What did you want to talk about?"

Orum lingered for a moment, then said in a neutral tone:

"Actually... I was quite touched by your speech. Everything you said is true — these children are indeed our future. So, I was wondering if there is an instructor's position left open at the Academy. I'm quite busy handling my territory and the Citadel, of course, but I think I can stay at the Academy for a few months. Learning from a seasoned veteran like me should benefit the kids, don't you think?"

Chapter-1935: Four Prodigies

"I'm Instructor Orum."

Orum looked at the youths crowding the dojo, hiding his confusion behind a cold expression. How the hell did he end up becoming a teacher? Doing something like that had never been a part of his plans.

In fact, he was supposed to be preparing to challenge the Second Nightmare right now. His soul core had long been saturated, and he had carefully assembled a potent arsenal of suitable Memories. He was even in negotiations to purchase a powerful Echo.

He was also in contact with several seasoned Awakened, searching for reliable companions to enter the Seed. Each of them had endured the horrors of the Nightmare Spell shoulder to shoulder with Orum at some point in the past, so he trusted both their skill and their character. However, assembling a strong cohort was about more than mere power.

There was also the question of complementing each other's powers and covering for each other's weaknesses… not to mention that most people were unwilling to even entertain the thought of gambling away their lives by challenging the Second Nightmare. In short, the process was slow.

So why was he at the Awakened Academy, preparing to teach a combat class?

Orum's gaze briefly fell on a young woman with raven hair and gloomy eyes.

There was his reason.

Of course, he did not let it show. It would not do Little Ki any good if

everyone knew that she was favored by one of the instructors, and more than that, he was not here to be her friend. He was here to teach her how to survive, and the lessons she needed to learn were all harsh and unforgiving. So, he had to maintain a stern facade.

Plus… Orum was ashamed to admit that he had not been a good elder to Little Ki. So, it was questionable if he even had the right to act friendly around her.

Looking at the crowd of Sleepers, he lingered for a few moments, and then asked in a cold voice:

"I will be teaching you combat. All of you here have already faced the First Nightmare, so you are not children anymore. You'll be treated as adults. Don't expect any pity from me — the world is a ruthless place, after all, and the Spell will not show you any mercy."

Orum smiled darkly.

"...What do you think the essence of combat is?"

Most youths remained silent, afraid to speak in front of the stern instructor. Only a few of them remained calm.

Anvil — the tall young man with a cold and unapproachable expression — raised his chin slightly and answered in a calm, clear voice:

"The essence of combat is a confrontation between warriors. The warrior who wields a better weapon and knows how to use it with greater skill wins. Combat is the purest expression of one's valor and will, and therefore, its essence is glory."

Orum stared at him silently.

'So many words… so little sense!'

This poor kid must have spent too much time with his father. Warden of Valor was a great man, sure, but his solemn adherence to knightly values often went too far. It was more than enough to indoctrinate an impressionable child into having strange ideas, no doubt.

Granted, young Anvil seemed better than he could have been. At least Orum saw a hint of cold practicality in him — his words might have been lofty, but he still remained grounded.

'Now, how do I disabuse him of these nonsensical notions without sounding too harsh…'

Before Orum could say anything, however, another voice resounded in the dojo — it was the youth with black hair and grey eyes he had noticed during the ceremony, speaking in an confident tone:

"The essence of combat is murder."

His simple answer caused a few chuckles from the crowd of Sleepers. Orum, however, looked at him with interest.

"Elaborate."

The youth looked at him in confusion.

"What is there to elaborate? The enemy wants to murder you, and you want to murder the bastard first. That's all there is to it — everything else is just nonsense."

Orum suppressed a smile.

'What a feral child.'

The youth had been delivered to the Northern Quadrant by ship, so he had no friends and no family here… or anywhere, most likely, considering his habits and attitude. Orum shook his head lightly.

"Not every battle is fought with the intent of killing the enemy."

The youth suddenly smiled.

"Well, that just means that you're fighting it wrong."

There was another wave of chuckles, and Orum blinked.

'That rascal…'

Something was telling him that he would have his hands full with

this one.

Smile of Heaven glanced at the cynical youth and hurriedly covered her mouth with a hand, trying to suppress laughter. Anvil, meanwhile, looked unamused… he even lost his flawless composure for a moment, shaking his head and uttering in a disapproving tone:

"Ridiculous…"

Well, at least Warden's son was still a human.

Orum shifted his gaze to Little Ki, who was standing in the back row, and asked neutrally:

"What do you think?"

The Sleepers turned around, not sure whom he was asking. Ki Song did not seem to have made an impression, so many looked confused.

Put on the spot, she frowned slightly.

Her answer, however, was calm:

"The essence of combat is failure. If you are forced to fight, you have already lost."

Orum raised an eyebrow, surprised by her answer. It had some merit, sure — more than that, he was somewhat inclined to agree. The second-best way to resolve a conflict was to never give the enemy a chance to fight you, in the first place — by killing them before the battle could even begin. The best way to resolve a conflict was to prevent it from happening entirely.

However, very few would have given such an answer in this era of strife and bloodshed. Awakened prided themselves on being skilled warriors above all else.

Smile of Heaven looked at the older girl with a hint of mirth in her eyes.

"You've just insulted every Awakened in the world… uh… Ki? Including our venerable parents… and Instructor Orum..."

Little Ki threw a gloomy glance at her, then turned her gaze to Orum and looked him right in the eyes.

"...It's not my problem if they feel insulted by the truth."

Smile of Heaven finally couldn't hold herself back and laughed.

Orum sighed quietly.

'I'm going to have my hands full with this one too, aren't I?'

He couldn't have known, of course...

But Sunny, who was experiencing his memories, did.

He knew that this was the first conversation between four people who would go on to shake the very foundation of the world.

Chapter-1936: Adulthood

The months before the winter solstice were precious and short, so the staff of the Academy — and Orum, who had somehow found himself playing the role of an instructor — wasted no time.

The Sleepers were trained and educated according to a gruelling schedule. The system was not very sophisticated, yet, but they were already seeing good results. The youths were learning how to use their new powers, absorbing knowledge about the Dream Realm, and getting to know each other — which would help them fight side by side with fellow Awakened in the future.

Of course, teaching them was not a simple affair. Each Sleeper possessed a unique Aspect, after all, and had received a varied level of prior training. Evaluating their potential was similarly not easy.

Nevertheless, four of them emerged as undisputed standouts early on.

The first one, quite unsurprisingly, was Smile of Heaven — the girl who had received a True Name in her First Nightmare. She was bright and beautiful, and there was something subtle about her that made people feel warm and at ease in her company.

More importantly than that, however, was the fact that she was strong — shockingly strong, in fact. Her Aspect remained a mystery to Orum, since she had never said anything about it, but her extraordinary talent was apparent even without it.

Her physical prowess, martial technique, combat intelligence, and willpower were all incredible, making Smile of Heaven a natural leader among the Sleepers. It was just that her personality was not exactly serious enough to settle in that position, and she didn't seem interested in authority and status, either. So, she was more of everyone's favorite person than the leader of the pack.

Instead, two boys were competing for the title.

One of them was, naturally, Anvil. The serious young man was excellent in all regards, his conduct was flawless, and his battle prowess was exemplary. Added to the immense fame of his family, it was no surprise that other Sleepers looked up to him.

Interestingly enough, he seemed more interested in knowing weapons than he was in wielding them — although his combat technique was still stellar. His Aspect granted him a high affinity to metal, which he used to skillfully control a flying sword or enhance his swordsmanship in a number of ingenious, and quite insidious, ways.

Both Smile of Heaven and Anvil showed a level of physical strength and endurance that Orum couldn't quite explain, and honestly found a little monstrous. However, he was happy to see the new generation thrive in the perilous world they had been born into.

The second candidate for the title of the very best among the crop of Sleepers, however, was a complete surprise. It was the brazen youth with grey eyes whose amusing remarks had made the entire class chuckle during the first combat class.

The young man had come out of nowhere and had no background to speak of. Nevertheless, he was truly a genius at all things having to do with swordsmanship and combat, easily holding his own against the scions of the most prestigious families and defeating them one after another.

His talent stood out starkly even when compared to the most excellent Sleepers in his class… perhaps of any Sleeper ever, really. His technique was rough, sure, but it was improving by leaps and bounds every day. It was to the point that Orum almost felt exasperated and insecure, unsure if he would have anything left to teach the rascal in a few more months.

The boy's Aspect was an unusual one, too. It had nothing to do with combat, but was instead connected to perception. The young man had an uncanny ability to perceive the underlying elements of various concepts and deduce the connections between them, granting him an unparalleled level of insight into all kinds of things — from

how a battle style flowed to how communicators were built.

And lastly, there was Ki Song.

While not as bright and eye-catching as the other three, she soon quietly emerged as one of the strongest members of her generation. Everything about her was balanced and without glaring flaws — she could wield a wide variety of melee weapons with deadly skill, never missed a shot when handling a bow, and could bring most opponents down in hand-to-hand combat.

Above all else, she possessed a deep well of knowledge and skills in the area where many other Sleepers only knew the bare minimum — wilderness survival. Just like her mother, who was an experienced hunter, Ki Song excelled at adapting to any environment, subterfuge, tracking, and eliminating enemies in the most efficient way.

She couldn't really use her Aspect in the training, though, because it was quite an eerie one — her Dormant Ability was pretty much the opposite of healing, allowing her to exacerbate any wound in a slow, but exponential process. Even though she could not very well use it against fellow Sleepers, it would be quite a potent Ability to wield in actual battles.

Orum made a point of paying special attention to preparing her for the Dream Realm — as much as he could without making it seem as though this one student was more important to him than all the rest.

He did his best…

But the passage of time was ruthless.

In what seemed like the blink of an eye, several months passed, and the day of the winter solstice approached.

On the last day, the instructors led the Sleepers to their designated sleeping pods in the newly built medical complex of the Academy. Orum finally gave up on his pretense and guided Little Ki to her pod personally.

Eventually, it was just the two of them in a small underground chamber. The young woman already looked sleepy and fatigued, so

he knew that he would have to leave soon to allow her to get ready and enter the sleeping pod.

Orum lingered, not knowing what to say.

After a while, he sighed.

"You did well, Little Ki. Very well. I should say that I am less worried about you than about any other Sleeper who is going to enter the Dream Realm today, but that would be a lie. In fact, I am quite worried, against all sense."

She looked at him with her usual somber expression, then smiled slightly from the corner of her mouth.

"...It's alright, Uncle Orie. I won't let you down."

A little smile touched Orum's lips in response.

'Oh. So she does remember, after all!'

He hesitated for a few moments, feeling glad, then finally asked the question that he had wanted to ask for a long time.

"How is your mother doing, by the way?"

Ki Song turned away and faced the sleeping pod, her slender figure silhouetted by its pale glow in the darkness of the chamber.

Her voice sounded even when she answered:

"She is dead."

Her words struck Orum like a hammer. He froze, paralyzed by the immensity of she had said, and afraid to comprehend it.

A sharp pain pierced his heart, making him shudder.

The young woman sighed, and then said quietly:

"She died not long before my First Nightmare. The being that lived in the volcano emerged and attacked the Citadel, so… she decided to fight it instead of running away, to protect the Gateway and the

people anchored to it. The people she was trying to protect, though, all decided to hide and leave her alone. The cowards."

Ki Song pressed a button, and the lid of the sleeping pod opened.

Turning to Orum, she looked at him calmly.

Her face was not the face of a teenager. Instead, it was already the face of an adult.

"The next time we meet, I will be an Awakened. See you soon, Uncle Orie."

A few weeks later, she returned to the waking world and fulfilled her promise.

Chapter-1937: Her Last Trace

Orum spent several weeks after the solstice feeling numb. There was little to do at the Academy now that the students were away, and he did not want to keep vigil next to their sleeping pods, like some other instructors did in secret.

So, he returned home, spending time with his sister and her children during the day and concentrating on taking care of his Citadel at night.

But even when Orum was with other people, he remained quiet and detached, his expression subdued. His mind was far away.

He was thinking about Ravenheart, his heart full of anguish and regret.

Death was an old friend to the original Awakened like himself, and he had lost many friends and comrades to its clutches. And yet, her death wounded him much deeper than anything had in the past.

It was bitterly ironic, in hindsight. Orum had lived a long life, and the time the two of them had spent together was not that long. The last time he had seen her was more than a decade ago. And yet… now that Ravenheart was gone, he realized that the great volume of space she inhabited in his heart was incomparable to the fleeting brevity of the few short months they had spent as companions.

But there was nothing he could do, anymore. He could never see her again, and he would never be able to repay his debt to her. It was too late. Ravenheart had died alone, far away, with no one standing by her side.

Now, her presence in his heart was replaced with a hollow absence, and all he was left with was regret.

The only trace of her that remained was her daughter.

"Orie, are you alright?"

He glanced at his sister, hearing concern in her voice, and smiled gently.

"Sure. Don't worry."

Orum hesitated for a few moments, then asked suddenly:

"Do you remember Ravenheart?"

Seeing confusion in her eyes, he corrected himself.

"Jiwon. Do you remember her?"

His sister frowned, started to shake her head, but then brightened.

"Ah! Auntie Jiwon? She was with us when we arrived at NQSC, right? Sure, I remember… she was very kind. Why are you asking?"

Orum looked away.

"...It's nothing. I met her daughter at the Academy recently, so I was just thinking about the past."

His sister smiled.

"Her daughter? Then you have to take good care of her! Oh, and protect her well from the male students… if she's as pretty as her mother, then they'll be making trouble!"

Orum forced out another smile and nodded.

"Sure. I will."

Soon enough, he found himself back at the Academy. By then, many of the Sleepers had undergone the Awakening and returned from the Dream Realm. A particular grey-eyed, brazen youth had even managed to earn himself a True Name on his first visit to the Dream Realm, and was now known as... Broken Sword? Orum would have to check the records again to be sure.

Ki Song was the last of the four front-runners to come back.

He found her in the dormitory cafeteria, eating a light meal in solitude. The Awakening had made the young woman even more beautiful, earning her quite a few stares, but he couldn't see her as anything but a child…

Even though he knew that she was not — not anymore, and not by a long shot.

"Uncle Orie."

He sat down across from her and looked at her silently, not knowing what to say.

Was he supposed to offer her condolences? Beg her for forgiveness? Promise her that everything will be fine?

All these words sounded hypocritical and hollow in his mind.

Eventually, Orum said:

"I heard that you ended up south of Bastion."

Ki Song nodded slowly.

"Yes. I was sent to the shores of the Stormsea. It took me some time to make it all the way to Rivergate."

He considered the known geography of the Dream Realm for a few moments, then smiled.

"It's not that far from my own Citadel. If you want… I can reach Rivergate in a few weeks and take you back with me. You'll be welcome among my people. I'll take care of you."

The young woman looked at him silently, her gaze calm and strangely dark. He couldn't read what she was thinking at all.

Eventually, she asked:

"Why would you go to all the trouble on my behalf?"

Orum met her gaze, then leaned back with a sigh.

Indeed, they were passing acquaintances at best. Little Ki was an orphan now, with no valuable connections to speak of. While talented, she had not proven herself yet, so there would be no factions clamoring to recruit her at all costs. Considering all that, his offer to brave the dangers of the Dream Realm for her sake could hardly be explained… unless one considered less savory motives.

Orum shook his head and answered simply:

"Because I owe your mother a debt."

He had wanted to say that he was Ravenheart's friend, but realized that he did not even deserve to make that claim.

Ki Song sighed deeply and looked away.

After a while, she suddenly asked:

"How great a debt?"

Orum hesitated, unsure how to answer. Eventually, he simply shrugged and said in a neutral tone:

"Great enough."

The young woman nodded slowly and faced him once again.

"Then I have a favor to ask you, Uncle Orie. A big one."

She paused for a moment, then said in a determined tone:

"Please help me reach my mother's Citadel."

Orum frowned.

'Ravenheart's Citadel…'

From what he remembered, it was called Jade Palace, and very little was known about it — after all, it was so remote, infinitely far from most populous human enclaves in the Dream Realm.

Many regions of the Dream Realm had already been explored, but few were under human control. The area around Bastion was relatively known, stretching all the way to the inhospitable mountain chain in the north. Beyond the mountains lay a vast and largely untamed wilderness, and beyond even that, a titanic mountain range known as the Hollow Mountains rose toward the sky.

A few daredevils had crossed the first mountain chain in the past, but no one had ever returned alive from the Hollow Mountains. They were a Death Zone, which was a name given to those regions of the Dream Realm where no human could ever survive.

The Jade Palace was said to be situated near the Hollow Mountains, but far, far to the west. The problem was that if one traveled west of Bastion, they would hit an impenetrable barrier of Death Zones, as well.

So, the only way to do what Little Ki wanted to do was to travel south of Rivergate, reach the Stormsea, sail west along its shore, make landfall beyond the wall of Death Zones, and then brave the perils of the Dream Realm all the way to the northern boundary of its known area.

It was a journey spanning tens of thousands of kilometers, full of unknown dangers and deadly threats. Even if they were to travel most of the distance by boat, it would still take them many months to reach the destination… if they weren't eaten by some dreadful Nightmare Creature on the way, of course.

The other option was to somehow find a Nightmare Gate connected to a Seed in the vicinity of the Jade Palace and follow the Call there.

The favor Little Ki was asking of him was indeed a big one.

Orum remained silent for a few moments, studying her youthful face somberly.

Eventually, he asked:

"Why do you want to go there?"

The young woman met his heavy gaze with dark determination, then

raised her chin slightly and answered in an even tone:

"Because it's mine."

Orum stared at her before looking away with a sigh.

There were a lot of things he had to consider before making the decision. His own Citadel, the preparations to challenge the Second Nightmare, potential risks… whether it was worth it to put himself in danger to help this young woman, who was practically a stranger, to begin with…

But really, deep down, he already knew what he was going to do.

Orum nodded.

"Alright, Little Ki… Awakened Song. I will help you reach the Jade Palace."

And he would make sure that she got there alive and well.

Chapter-1938: Dispossessed

It took Orum a few days to arrange his affairs and prepare to depart for Rivergate. He was not a pillar of humanity by any means, but he was still a very wealthy man — even if the worst happened, his sister and her kids would not want for anything. They shared his high rank in the controversial citizenship system established by the government a few years back, as well.

That said, Orum was not planning on dying in some godforsaken corner of the Dream Realm on the way to the Jade Palace. He was not arrogant, but he was confident in himself. Seasoned Awakened like him were few and far between — in the whole world, there were maybe only a few dozen.

He had not only survived, but also thrived during the darkest days of humanity. So, the Nightmare Spell would have to work really hard to bring him down.

Leaving his body in a sleeping pod and walking through the gates of his Citadel, Orum traveled south. Traversing the wilderness reminded him of his younger days, but he did not allow nostalgia to make him complacent. A couple of weeks later, he arrived at the edges of an ancient forest.

His armor had a few scratches, and there was a scattering of soul shards in his pack. A trail of dead abominations was left in his wake.

The forest, however… the forest was an entirely different kind of beast. Entering it alone was simply asking to be swallowed by it.

So, Orum made camp and waited for a while. The sea of leaves rustled in the distance, and the nearby river murmured as it flowed south, disappearing between the tall trees.

He spent a restless night on its bank. On the next day, a battered ship

appeared from somewhere upstream, and Orum used his chance to brave the strong current and climb aboard — the crew was surprised to see him, but glad to have another Awakened blade with them for the last and most dangerous leg of the journey.

The river was teeming with Nightmare Creatures, but it was still safer than the dark expanse of the forest. So, unless someone had a cohort of Warden's knights escorting them, they preferred to travel by water.

Orum reached the Mirror Lake, changed ships at Bastion, and continued on his way to Rivergate.

By the time he met Little Ki there, he was carrying quite a few soul shards with him.

"Here. Take them… the more saturated your core is, the easier it will be for us to travel."

The young woman took the shards silently and crushed them one by one in her fist.

They were currently in the dining hall of Rivergate. There was a small crowd of Awakened having a meal there — some of them warriors serving Jest, some simply people anchored at the ancient fortress.

The master of the Citadel himself, luckily, was nowhere to be seen. Now that Anvil had Awakened, his father's old comrades — those of them who were still alive — were probably busy guiding the young man in hunting down Nightmare Creatures in the wilderness, both to saturate his core and to help him gain experience. Warden had big hopes for his youngest son.

Orum looked at Little Ki quietly.

She was wearing an enchanted black leather armor, trying to look calm and confident. However, he knew that she was most likely disoriented and afraid. It took time to get used to the Dream Realm… and most people never did.

Those like him who were at home here were the minority.

He hesitated for a few moments.

"Why do you really want to go to the Jade Palace? Are you planning to take revenge on the Nightmare Creature that killed your mother? If so… sure, let's do it. But we'll have to be careful. Ravenheart was strong, so if that thing managed to kill her, we have our work cut out for us."

She paused for a moment, then shook her head.

"No. The Nightmare Creature… it's already dead. Mom killed it before succumbing to her wounds."

Orum raised an eyebrow.

"Why, then?"

Little Ki gave him her usual gloomy look and remained silent for a while.

Eventually, she said:

"She arranged for the Citadel to become mine, in case anything happened to her. The uncles and aunties who live there… they were supposed to take care of me and carry out her will."

Orum frowned, already suspecting what had happened.

"But they haven't?"

She smiled darkly.

"No. They took the shards and Memories she set aside for me, and they've taken the Citadel, too. They told me that they'll gladly surrender it to me if I Awaken and come to claim ownership of the Jade Palace, though."

Orum sighed. Of course, they had said that — knowing perfectly well that the Dream Realm was vast, and her chances of making it to that remote place alive were very slim. A young girl with no connections would not dare to travel far across the wilderness, in the first place.

Ruling a Citadel was both prestigious and lucrative, so the newly ownerless Jade Palace would ignite people's greed.

They had underestimated Little Ki's determination, though.

As well as her connections.

He shook his head and asked in a business-like tone:

"What is your Awakened Ability?"

She hesitated for a few moments.

"...I can animate inanimate objects and control them like puppets."

Orum considered that Ability for a while. It sounded useful… almost as if Little Ki could create surrogate Echoes without actually receiving them from the Spell. Of course, he would have to see just how powerful her puppets were, and how well she could control them in a fight.

A puppeteer was quite a frightening existence, though. Orum had battled a few abominations with similar powers in the past, and each time was a real nightmare.

He nodded.

"What about your Flaw?"

The young woman stared at him silently.

"...I'm not telling."

Orum laughed.

"Good. I would have stopped you if you tried. Never reveal your Flaw to anyone, girl. Not even your family."

She continued to stare at him with the same expression.

"I don't have a family."

He hid his pain and discomfort behind a smile.

"Well, you will. Hopefully, one day soon."

At that, her expression subtly changed, turning even more gloomy.

They left Rivergate the next day, traveling by boat to the shores of the Stormsea.

There, a large ship was already waiting for them — Orum had pulled some strings and arranged passage west for himself and Little Ki. Despite the fact that he knew the captain, hiring her had cost him a fortune.

Soon, the ship set sail and dove into the perilous mists of the nebulous ocean.

Chapter-1939: Life and Death

Orum had seen too many terrible things to count, both before and after the descent of the Nightmare Spell… but the voyage across the Stormsea was by far the most harrowing experience of his life.

The nebulous ocean was boundless and unfathomably deep, with untold horrors dwelling beneath its restless waves. It was shrouded in impenetrable fog sometimes, and at other times, surged and boiled in the throes of devastating storms. Night and day never followed a set pattern, sometimes coming and going in an instant, sometimes lingering for far too long.

Most of the time, though, there was twilight, with countless pale stars shining on the velvet background of the distant sky. All of it felt as if the world was fragmented and disconnected here, and that made Orum feel lost.

The fact that he was away from land, which was the foundation of his Aspect, did not help one bit.

The wooden ship they sailed upon was constantly assaulted — either by the towering waves and hurricane winds or by dreadful abominations that dwelled beneath the waves. And that was even after their experienced captain had set a course that took them past the dwellings of the truly deadly Nightmare Creatures, sticking close to the shore, where the danger was less severe.

Both Orum and Little Ki were forced to participate in many battles, barely surviving a few of them.

'...And I thought that Warden and his people, who had chosen to settle in the middle of an actual Titan, were insane.'

Nightwalker and his ilk were far more crazy. The captain — a beautiful Ascended woman with strange indigo eyes — seemed

perfectly at ease in these terrifying waters, though, never losing her cheerful mood. The only times she looked wistful was then talking about her newborn baby, an infant boy named Naeve, whom she had left in the waking world to make this journey.

Orum felt a bit guilty for cashing in the favor she owed him.

In any case, he was having trouble maintaining his composure at sea. Considering that Little Ki had just Awakened and did not have a lot of experience, he would have expected her to struggle much more… but to his surprise, she took the horrors of the Stormsea in stride, never showing any signs of fear or agitation.

It took him some time to understand that it was because she had never expected anything else from the world, to begin with. Orum and the other Awakened of his generation had a frame of reference and were able to compare reality to how it used to be before the Nightmare Spell.

Little Ki and her peers, however, had been born into the dread of the Spell and grew up surrounded by Nightmare Gates, murderous abominations, and chilling stories of the Dream Realm. They had never known anything else, and so, the terrors of the modern era were simply mundane reality to them.

Orum understood that rationally, but the young woman's callous indifference still seemed eerie to him. It was more than a little inhuman.

Nevertheless, it was quite helpful on this dangerous journey.

The Stormsea was harrowing, but it did not claim their lives. Eventually, the ship made landfall on a desolate shore far west of Bastion and Rivergate, past the impenetrable barrier of Death Zones.

Orum and Little Ki said their goodbyes to the ship's crew and captain and headed deeper inland alone.

It took them a few weeks to reach the River of Tears, which would serve as their guide on the way north. The estuary of the great river was ruled by a particularly terrifying Nightmare Creature, so ships

couldn't enter it from the Stormsea — that was why Orum and the young woman he was escorting had to travel by land.

Looking at the vast river, Little Ki sighed.

"It's a shame. If someone managed to slay that thing and conquer the estuary, human territories in the west would have become connected to the Stormsea, and therefore to the eastern enclaves. They would have started to develop much faster."

Orum smiled.

"Well, maybe someone will one day in the future. For now, however, a Corrupted Terror is too dire of an enemy for us humans… it's not impossible to kill one if enough Ascended joined forces, but many of them would probably perish."

His smile dimmed a little, and he sighed.

"For now, all we humans can do in the Dream Realm is survive… and even then just barely. I don't think we'll be able to concern ourselves with things like progress and development any time soon."

Little Ki remained motionless for a while, looking over the vast expanse of flowing water with a thoughtful expression. Eventually, she turned away and aimed her gaze north.

"Let's go, Uncle Orie."

And so, they did.

There was a Citadel on the shore of the River of Tears a few weeks of travel north. From there, they would be able to hire a rowboat and sail upstream — either all the way to the edges of the Moonriver Plains, or until the boat was destroyed by the abominations populating the river.

Orum and Little Ki had plenty of opportunities to fight side by side on the way to the Citadel. Of course, he was the main force of the small cohort — both due to his power and his experience. However, these skirmishes helped Orum understand just how precious the young woman's Aspect truly was.

It was not even her Awakened Ability, which allowed Little Ki to bring inanimate puppets to life — those were strong and convenient to have around, sure, but heavily limited by her ability to construct them. After all, animating a log would not be very helpful, considering that a log was relatively fragile and, most importantly, had no articulated limbs.

The young woman had made a few crude dolls out of clay that Orum had summoned, hardened to resemble granite, and shaped. They were quite handy, drawing the attention of the Nightmare Creatures away, stalling the enemies, and giving him a chance to slay the abominations without risking his own body. If one was destroyed, another one could be built.

Sadly, these dolls were still too weak, no stronger than mundane humans would be and far more clumsy. Perhaps if Little Ki had spent a fortune to commission one or two from an Awakened craftsman, things could have been different, but it was not something they could do now.

…It was her Dormant Ability, however, that made Orum reevaluate the young woman's Aspect.

Little Ki's insidious power was reasonably strong on its own… but it was when she fought side by side with someone else that it truly shone. Especially someone like Orum, who possessed an Aspect capable of dealing direct damage to the enemy.

With the young woman by his side, his own effectiveness increased exponentially. That was because Orum did not have to deal fatal wounds to Nightmare Creatures anymore, which was quite difficult to do. Instead, any wound sufficed, from relatively severe ones to insignificant and shallow.

If he managed to as much as scratch an abomination by controlling the earth, Little Ki's power would infect the little wound, slowly making it more and more dire. The cut would continuously widen and grow deeper, more and more blood would flow from it, and the flesh surrounding it would start to rot.

If enough time passed, the scratch would become a deadly wound,

draining the Nightmare Creature of all life. And the more deep the initial wound was, the less time had to pass.

Watching the abominations die in agony was quite chilling… but also quite satisfying.

More than that, Orum felt at peace, knowing that with such power, Little Ki would be welcomed by any cohort. Even the best warriors would benefit greatly from having her by their side, and that was not even considering her excellent martial talent and keen mind. So, her future was all but set.

If she survived that journey, of course...

Ensuring that was his job.

Chapter-1940: Ugly Side

Orum's confidence had not been in vain. In the end, they did make it across the entirety of the explored area of the Dream Realm alive, even if it took them many months.

The journey had been dreadful and permeated by the stench of blood, but he and Little Ki had not had to endure it without respite. They travelled from one Citadel to another, slowly moving north, and took breaks when arriving at a new human stronghold.

Sometimes, they simply remained at the Citadel, enjoying the hospitality of the locals, patching up their wounds, and recuperating. Sometimes, they used the Gateways to return to the waking world, climb out of the sleeping pods, and let their tired minds and souls rest by enjoying the lavish offerings of the modern era.

In the process, Orum had to reevaluate his opinion of the western human territory in the Dream Realm. Yes, it was far less lively and populated than the eastern enclaves, but there were still far more people using the isolated Citadels as shelter than he had expected.

It made sense, in hindsight. The number of Awakened in the world was increasing with every year, and it was already incomparable to the early days of the Nightmare Spell that he remembered.

Back then, the Dream Realm was alien and frightening, and meeting a single human here felt like a blessing. But now, there were whole communities with hundreds or even thousands Awakened living here. Many of those Awakened did not even have to fight for their lives every day, providing valuable services to the warriors or working to maintaining and improve the Citadels — even in the west.

Some of the Citadels here were small and constantly besieged by abominations, but others were like small towns, with strong garrisons and powerful lords leading the people to if not prosperity, then at

least stability. The only thing that was missing was a figure like Warden — someone strong enough and influential enough to unite the disparate groups of struggling Awakened and build connections between their strongholds, allowing humans to cooperate and support each other.

Little Ki was absorbing the reality of this wild land like a sponge, observing the lives of the local Awakened with her serious, gloomy eyes. She didn't speak much, but the further north they went, the more her gaze seemed full of determination.

Eventually, they scaled the Moonriver Plains and came in view of the mountains where her mother's Citadel stood.

On that day, Orum looked at the sky and saw dark flakes of ash fall from it like snow.

He lingered for a while, then sighed and then looked at the silent young woman by his side.

In these months they had spent together, Little Ki had grown from a newly Awakened novice to an experienced warrior. The excellent foundation of martial techniques taught to her by Ravenheart bloomed, becoming actual skill. That skill had been sharpened by countless battles with Nightmare Creatures, and her character had undergone a subtle change, giving her more confidence.

Her soul core was also much more potent now, reinforced by hundreds of soul shards. She had also earned quite a few Memories, and was not at all the destitute Awakened she had been after her inheritance was stolen by unscrupulous people.

However…

Orum had not taught her the most important lesson. One that he was reluctant to teach the daughter of his dead friend and benefactor, but nevertheless had to.

There was no place for naïveté and innocence in the Dream Realm.

He sighed.

"Little Ki… we will reach the Jade Palace soon."

She nodded, then smiled a little.

Her smile looked a little dark with ash swirling around her pale face.

"Finally."

Orum hesitated for a moment.

"...What do you think will happen when we do? When those people promised to surrender their claim to your mother's Citadel, they weren't necessarily being sincere... you know that, right?"

The young woman just stared at him silently, as if not understanding the question.

He pursed his lips.

"You've grown quite good as battling Nightmare Creatures, Little Ki. You've done well to survive so far. But you need to realize something important… out here in the Dream Realm, abominations are not the only danger. Humans can be just as dangerous as abominations, and just as monstrous. Do you understand what I am trying to say?"

Orum had matured in the chaos caused by the descent of the Nightmare Spell, so he knew all too well how hideous and vile humans could be. Little Ki, however, was raised in the world where relative stability had already been established — she did not have an opportunity to witness the ugly side of humanity yet.

Which was a mercy, as far as he was concerned.

The young woman considered his question for a while, then tilted her head a little, confusion still apparent in her eyes.

"Of course, I understand."

She lingered for a moment, and then added matter-of-factly:

"I'm a human too."

Orum sighed, then nodded and headed west.

"Good. Let's be done with this dreadful journey, then."

They traversed the Moonriver Plain and scaled the mountains, eventually coming in view of a colossal stone bridge. On its other side, a beautiful palace that seemed to be cut from obsidian stood, shrouded in a billowing cloud of ash.

This was where Ravenheart had lived, fought, and died.

The stark landscape was lonesome and beautiful, just like she was in Orum's mind.

He shivered in the cold and took a step forward.

"We should cross the bridge as fast as we can."

Little Ki followed. As they stepped on the bridge and walked across it, struggling against the powerful winds, she said suddenly:

"Uncle Orie…"

He spared her a glance.

The young woman remained silent for a few moments, and then said quietly:

"No matter what happens once we reach the Citadel, don't interfere. I have to handle it myself. Promise me."

Orum hesitated, but eventually nodded.

"Alright. I won't do anything."

'Unless you're in danger.'

She looked at the distant edifice of the dark palace, cold determination burning in her eyes.

Suddenly, Orum felt a chilling premonition grasp his heart.

He couldn't quite explain it, but grew tense nonetheless.

Chapter-1941: Children of a New Era

The inhabitants of the Citadel noticed their approach from afar. By the time Orum and Little Ki reached the gates of the palace, a small crowd had already gathered in the great hall beyond, looking at them with varied emotions.

There were very few Awakened anchored here — no more than thirty. Some of them looked surprised, some were tense. The latter were probably those who recognized Little Ki, and knew that they had sinned against this young woman.

The two battered clay dolls following her attracted quite a few stares, as well.

Orum stayed back, giving Little Ki space. She walked forward with confident steps, keeping her hand on the hilt of a Memory sword that rested in a makeshift scabbard on her belt.

One of the Awakened took a few steps forward, as well, facing her with a smile. He was a man a few years younger than Orum, with handsome features and long blonde hair.

There was insincere warmth in his friendly voice:

"Little Ki! Or should I say Awakened Song? Welcome to Jade Palace… we were all happy to hear that you have survived the winter solstice unscathed. Warms my heart, really, to know that you are doing well… granted, I am surprised to see you all the way here. Didn't the Spell send you to Rivergate? How come you are not there?"

The young woman remained silent for a while, studying him and the other Awakened gathered in the dark hall. Her expression was cold, and her eyes were once again full of somber glum… no, not even

glum.

They were simply full of darkness, devoid of any human warmth.

Little Ki looked at the blonde man and said calmly:

"Where else would I be? This is my Citadel. I have come to claim what is mine."

The man hesitated, his smile growing a little cold.

"...Come on, girl. Surely you didn't take what I said the last time we met seriously? I was just being polite because of how thankful we all were to your mother. You are an adult now, so you should know better. You and your friend are most welcome here… in our Citadel. But someone as young and inexperienced as you is not fit to rule it. Don't you think?"

Little Ki stared at him silently and ignored his question.

Instead, she suddenly asked one of her own:

"Where were you when my mother died?"

The man blinked.

"What?"

She looked around the hall, piercing every Awakened with a cold gaze, and repeated her question.

"Where were you when my mother died? All of you. She had welcomed you here. She had fed and protected you. And yet, when she was fighting against that thing, bleeding, dying… where were you?"

Some of the Awakened looked away, some met her gaze with anger.

The young woman snarled.

"All of you are complicit. All of you are her murderers. And yet you have the audacity to claim that this is your Citadel. That I am too

weak to rule it. You… you cowards are calling me weak?"

The blonde man's smile disappeared, replaced by a dark expression. His eyes were suddenly full of malice, making Orum tense up.

"Listen, little girl… I will forgive your rudeness this once. I am quite a magnanimous person, after all, and so are my people. Considering what we owe your mother, we are willing to let this entire misunderstanding go. She was a benevolent and generous person, too… so you should show the same grace and forgive us as well, like she would have. Carrying resentment in your heart won't be good for you."

There was a subtle threat in that last sentence.

Little Ki looked at him for a moment, then slowly shook her head.

"...Gods might forgive. But I won't."

He frowned.

"What?"

Little Ki closed her eyes for a moment.

"Then again, gods are dead. And my kind mother is dead, too."

The man's frown deepened…

But before he could say anything, the young woman's hand moved, and her sword pierced his neck.

His eyes widened, and a torrent of blood flowed from his mouth.

Standing near the gate of the palace, Orum flinched, shocked.

Little Ki, meanwhile, shook the corpse of the blonde man off her sword and took a step forward. Her expression did not change at all, as if she had not just killed a human being.

The rest of the Awakened were a few seconds too late to react. Some reeled back, some reached for their weapons or began to summon

Memories.

The young woman wielding a bloodied sword did not say anything more, dashing forward in eerie silence. Her two puppets moved, too.

Orum stood frozen near the wall, watching the battle in horror. He had already known how skilled Little Ki was, and how eerie her Aspect was… but he had never seen her Ability used against fellow humans.

Only when he saw Awakened scream and try to stem the flow of blood from wounds that had seemed shallow, falling to the ground in agony, did he realize how terrifying and morbid the young woman's power truly was.

And how chillingly ruthless she was.

Taking lives, gifting death.

There were almost thirty Awakened in the Jade Palace, but they were no match for one of the most talented students of the Academy. If they were strong, they would not have run away or hidden themselves when Ravenheart faced her last enemy… still, they could have easily overwhelmed Little Ki with sheer numbers.

If they were brave enough, and decisive enough.

But they were not, and she gave them no time to get their fear under control.

No… in fact, she purposefully terrified and intimidated them, killing the first few in the most gruesome and cruel way.

After that… it was a slaughter.

The clay puppets eventually fell, their bodies broken and shattered, but the young woman was relentless.

As Orum stood, motionless, she methodically killed most of the Awakened in the hall. Some tried to escape, but she hunted them down one after another. No one was spared. Her retribution was cruel, thorough, and merciless.

Some time later, the dark hall of the Jade Palace was the scene of a morbid massacre. Dozens of mutilated bodies littered the floor, and a lake of blood gathered on the floor, glistening coldly in the light of crude torches.

Little Ki was standing in the center of that crimson lake, breathing heavily. She was soaked in the blood herself from head to toe — much of this blood was her own, but most was not.

And yet…

Her expression was still calm and indifferent, as if what she had done was nothing special.

As if what she had done was only natural.

It was not the slaughter, but that lack of shock, trauma, and remorse that made Orum feel as if his heart was constricted and full of terror.

This was what they were like…

The children of the new era.

Those born into the world of the Nightmare Spell.

Frowning deeply, Orum finally moved and walked slowly toward Little Ki… toward Ki Song.

As he approached, she looked at him and smiled.

"Uncle Orie… I am done here. We can take the Gateway next."

She did not even seem to notice how disturbed he was, and had not assumed that he would be.

Orum studied the bleeding corpses silently.

Eventually, he faced her and asked, his voice trembling a little:

"This… this… do you think that this is what your mother would have wanted?"

The young woman looked at him strangely.

She frowned a little, as if confused by his question once again.

Then, she shook her head.

"No, of course not. My mother was a very kind person."

Before he could say anything, Ki Song sighed and added, her voice an odd mix of sorrow, longing, and resentment:

"That is why she is dead."

She looked at the people she had killed, gave one of the corpses a kick, and looked at Orum with calm indifference.

"It is just how you have taught us, Uncle Orie. The world is a ruthless place, and the Spell will not show us any mercy. There is no place for kindness in this world."

He shivered slightly, hearing his own words come out of her bloodied mouth, spoken so easily and with such confidence. As if it was a trivial truth.

'That is not… what I meant...'

But instead of saying that, Orum winced and covered his face with a palm for a moment.

Eventually, he sighed.

"You still made a mistake, Ki Song. Whether they deserved to die or not, you still needed them. One person can't defend a Citadel… you should have executed the leaders and brought others to heel. You need warriors to serve you! Otherwise, the first swarm of Nightmare Creatures will make the Jade Palace their nest."

The young woman looked around, then smiled brightly.

"About that… I've been thinking about my Aspect lately, Uncle Orie. These clay puppets we've made, I think they were the wrong solution all along."

Orum frowned, not understanding what she meant.

…He remained confused up until the moment the first of the corpses suddenly moved, and then slowly rose from the ground.

Ki Song rubbed her chin, and then nodded in satisfaction.

"Yes. This works much better."

Chapter-1942: Master Orum

The last memory of Master Orum Cassie showed Sunny took place several years later. By then, the Jade Palace — now known as Ravenheart — had already become a thriving Citadel, attracting thousands of humans from the eastern reaches of the Dream Realm.

Ki Song herself had become a renowned Awakened, her fame second only to that of those three brilliant stars of her generation — Smile of Heaven, Broken Sword, and Anvil of Valor. Her influence and authority spread all the way to the estuary of the River of Tears, where a Corrupted Terror still dwelled, blocking convenient access to the Stormsea.

The prominent families of the First Generation were already being called the Legacy Clans. Valor, Immortal Flame, and the newly established House of Night were at the height of their power, known as the best among equals. No one called them the Great Clans, yet, but the idea of some distinguished families being a cut above the rest was already apparent.

Clan Song was relatively small and unassuming when compared to these titans.

Orum's relationship with Ki Song, however... had grown distant over the years. After helping her settle in the newly retaken Jade Palace, he made the long journey back home, where his own Citadel was waiting for him. They still saw each other in the waking world from time to time, but not too often.

It was partially because both were terribly busy with their own affairs, and partially because Orum did not feel completely comfortable around Little Ki anymore. That strange discomfort made him feel both ashamed and conflicted, but he could not do anything about how he felt.

That young woman… frightened him, a little.

Many things happened since the day she massacred the people whom her mother had died to protect. New regions of the Dream Realm were explored and conquered. The number of Awakened continued to grow exponentially. Orum himself finally challenged the Second Nightmare and became a Master, receiving his Legacy Relic as a reward.

His niece turned sixteen and became a carrier of the Nightmare Spell.

Which was why he was now back at the Awakened Academy, preparing to continue educating her in an official capacity.

The first batch of Sleepers had yet to arrive, so there was nothing much for him to do. Orum checked the equipment in the dojo, then visited the medical complex, and finally made his way to the cafeteria to have an early lunch.

His steps slowed down as soon as he entered, though.

That was because there was someone familiar sitting behind one of the tables in the mostly empty dining hall.

Little Ki looked quite different now. She was still young, but the teenage girl he remembered was gone, replaced by a mature young woman. She had to be… twenty-four, twenty-five by now? Her gloomy awkwardness was replaced by confident grace, and her ravishing beauty was impossible to ignore.

Orum hesitated for a moment, then put on a smile and headed in her direction.

"Awakened Song. It is so nice to see you, young lady… how have you been?"

Her own charming smile seemed quite sincere.

"Master Orum! I didn't expect to run into you here. I am doing well, thank you… what about you?"

He sighed.

"My niece has just conquered her First Nightmare, so I am back at the Academy to help prepare her for the winter solstice. But what brings you here? Are you planning to teach a class or consult one of the specialists?"

Ki Song leaned back a little, glanced at the empty chairs surrounding her table, and echoed his sigh.

"No. I am meeting a few colleagues to discuss an important matter. We chose the Academy to reminisce a little. Sadly, they seem to be running a little late… well, their time can be said to be more valuable than mine."

There was a gentle hint of dissatisfaction in her voice.

Orum remained silent for a moment, then smiled.

"Well, I'll scold them if you want. For now, though, I'll leave you and go get something to eat… we should catch up after your meeting is over, though. I really want to hear all about how your Citadel is doing."

The shallow politeness of their conversation pained him deeply. But at the same time, he felt a little relieved to have a way out.

Orum excused himself and went to take a seat a few tables away.

By the time his food arrived, a few new faces appeared in the cafeteria.

It was a very august reunion.

Smile of Heaven and Broken Sword — his former students — arrived first. The two had been attached at the hip ever since their days at the Academy, but were officially married now.

They were a beautiful couple, indeed.

Broken Sword spoke first, his calm voice too strong and confident to be ignored:

"Awakened Song. Please forgive us for being late."

Smile of Heaven grinned and landed on a chair next to Ki Song, grasping her shoulder in a friendly manner.

"Song! I haven't seen you in ages… since the wedding, I think? What, did you not like the cake? Impossible… mom personally made that cake…"

Not long after, two more people arrived.

One was Anvil of Valor, as composed and serious as ever, while the other… the other was an unfamiliar youth with a pleasant smile on his lips. Orum would have mistaken him for one of the Sleepers who were supposed to arrive at the Academy in the next few days, if not for the fact that the teenager was obviously already an Awakened.

The two of them took their places across from Broken Sword and Smile of Heaven, Anvil greeting everyone with a few short words.

The five Awakened remained silent for a few moments, but then Broken Sword suddenly slapped Anvil on the shoulder and smiled brightly.

"Congratulations! I hear you're a father now. Gods, you didn't waste any time, did you, Vale? I can't believe you have a son..."

Anvil glanced coldly at his shoulder, then cleared his throat.

"Well. Yes. In any case… we should discuss the preparations, shouldn't we? You know that I have invited Awakened Song to join us. Naturally, she needs no introduction — we all know how excellent Ki is. This young man, however…"

He looked at the smiling youth, lingered for a moment, and then added calmly:

"This is Asterion. We met in Bastion, and I believe that he will be of great help when we challenge the Second Nightmare…"

***

Orum's memory ended there. He moved further away to avoid eavesdropping on the conversation, not knowing that what he was

witnessing was the inception of the legendary cohort that would shake the foundations of the world.

After that, Sunny found himself back in the damp cell, looking into Cassie's beautiful blue eyes through Orum's own. The ironclad figure of the King of Swords towered behind her — both familiar and unrecognizably changed.

The features of the young man Orum had once taught could still be recognized on the somber face of the Sovereign, but just barely. Anvil's gaze was infinitely heavier than it had been once, and there was no hint of human emotions in it anymore.

Only the cold indifference of sharpened steel.

Cassie lingered for a moment, feeling tired and drained of essence. There were other spies she would have to interrogate, too…

She sighed, and then rose from her knees. Taking a step back, she faced Anvil.

"...I have learned what you asked for, Your Majesty."

Cassie lingered for a moment before adding:

"For what it's worth, Master Orum's family does not seem to be aware of his actions. Saint Helie… her loyalty was not compromised."

Anvil gave her a curt nod and stepped closer to Orum, looking down at him with a cold expression.

When he spoke, however, a hint of emotion finally found its way into his usually even voice:

"...Was it worth it, teacher? To betray your own for that woman? I wonder what she had offered you to change sides."

Orum looked up at him and smiled darkly, no sign of fear or regret written on his weathered face.

After a few moments of silence, he said slowly:

"Worth it? Sure… I guess it was. I finally managed to repay my debt, at least."

Anvil took a deep breath and looked away.

"You are a fool. She is a monster, don't you know? To her, people's lives have little value. She'll gladly rule the living, but if that's not an option… she'll rule the dead, as well. Did you really wish to leave your family in a world she would create?"

Orum looked at him for a while, then snarled, his eyes turning cold with contempt.

"A monster? All of you are monsters. But she... sees us as people, at least. To you, we're all just tools to be studied, used, and reforged. We're merely your swords.

Say what you will about that girl, but Little Ki… she has never treated people as objects. Look at her daughters. She has done right by them."

He looked at Anvil with pity and smiled.

His smile was pale and sad, but there was also a hint of defiant pride in his tired eyes.

"...What have you done? What kind of heartless world are you going to create?"

Anvil stared down at the old man from above, not saying anything.

The silence stretched for a few moments, but then…

Something moved.

Cassie felt piercing pain and flinched, her hand jerking up to grasp her neck.

At the same time, her vision spun.

For a moment, she saw the stone roof of the chamber, then its damp wall, then the floor. And finally, a body falling over, surrounded by

the rattling of chains.

Then, Cassie was blind once again.

She was standing motionlessly near the King of Swords, while Master Orum… Master Orum's beheaded body lay at her feet.

He was dead.

The nauseating stench of blood assaulted Cassie's nostrils, and she held her breath.

Then, she raised her hands and hid her eyes behind her blue blindfold.

Somewhere near, Anvil let out a heavy sigh.

He remained silent for a dozen seconds, then turned to her, regaining his emotionless composure.

His voice sounded calm:

"Lady Cassia… there are more prisoners waiting to be interrogated. If you will."

She allowed herself to linger for a moment, and then bowed her head respectfully.

"...Yes, my king."

Chapter-1943: Raven Queen

Cassie released her Transformation, and Sunny was finally freed from the torrent of alien memories.

He exhaled slowly and looked away, staring into the distance with an absent expression.

Witnessing human memories was not at all like reading a book or watching a recording — they were often vague and disjointed, sometimes withered and shallow, sometimes fresh and intensely vivid. It was hard to make sense of them, and it was even harder to fathom their every nuance.

Sunny was still reeling from receiving such a great amount of information in such a short amount of time.

What was more… he was still reeling from witnessing the life of Master Orum.

It was such a strange thing. The old man was a complete stranger to him, and yet, Sunny felt so close to him. How could he not, after experiencing what Cassie had gleaned?

It was because of this unearned closeness that Sunny felt shaken by Orum's death at the hands of the King of Swords.

As if he had lost an old friend.

He sighed and looked down, considering Master Orum's long life and bitter death.

It felt wrong, for a member of the First Generation to die so ingloriously, hidden from everyone's sight in a small stone cell… by another human's hand. The old man had witnessed so much, had fought so hard, and had survived so many dreadful ordeals. He had

lived through the darkest days of humanity and saw a new world being built on the ruins of the old one.

And yet, his storied life had come to such a grievous end.

'Ah...'

At least he had been at peace, in those last moments. He had perished loyal to his principles, finally at ease for having repaid the debt to his long-lost friend.

That did not really do anything to assuage the bitterness Sunny felt… but it was at least something.

Orum had cared deeply about Ravenheart and her daughter, after all.

'Ki Song.'

Sunny wondered if the Queen of Worms cared about the old man, in turn. Would his death sadden her, like it had saddened him? Or was the shy little girl Orum had met once, a long time ago, completely gone?

Replaced by a Supreme being whose heart and mind were closer to those of a deity than those of a human, and therefore devoid of humanity...

Sunny did not know.

His thoughts drifted to Ki Song herself.

Cassie had not been wrong — they learned a lot about the Sovereigns, and Ki Song in particular, from Master Orum's memories.

Her roots, her scars… the details of her Aspect, the formative experiences that had made her who she was today. Of course, there was plenty Sunny did not know about the Queen of Song, since there were vast swathes of her life that Orum had not been privy to. But he knew enough to infer many things.

In fact, there was almost too much for him to mull over.

He did not even know where to start.

'First… her character.'

Queen Song was without a doubt an entirely different being from the person Little Ki had been. Time changed people, and so did impactful events… and she had experienced plenty of those. More than most people ever would.

If even the world itself had been fundamentally altered by the things Ki Song had lived through and made happen, how could she have remained the same? And that was not even accounting for the inevitable changes that walking the Path of Ascension caused.

Both Sunny and Cassie were examples of how deeply people transformed as a result of attaining higher Ranks. The way they lived, thought, and perceived the world was quite different from mundane humans. Ki Song, meanwhile, had walked down the Path of Ascension much further than they had… than any human of the waking world had, except for the other two Sovereigns.

…And yet, some things about a person never changed.

'If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.'

Was that not what Nephis had told him once, in the depths of the Third Nightmare?

Sunny would not go as far as to say that he knew Ki Song now, but he knew her a fair bit.

She had been born in the year of the Nightmare Spell's descent. Her mother had been a benevolent, but solitary Awakened warrior. Ravenheart spent most of her time in the Dream Realm, so Ki Song must have felt lonely, growing up near her quietly humming sleeping pod.

And yet, she had loved her mother fiercely. She had also felt proud of her, because her mother was one of the most powerful Awakened in the world… but not the most powerful.

It did not escape Sunny's attention how neglected young Ki Song had felt in the company of the true aristocrats like Anvil and Smile of Heaven. It must have been an awkward position for a child to be in — to come from a family that was prominent enough to be included in the gatherings of the nascent Legacy Clans, but not prominent enough to garner much respect or attention from them.

Especially considering her talent, which was in no way inferior to those who were seen as her betters.

And then, there was Ravenheart's tragic death, and the ruthless retribution young Ki Song had delivered to those who had stood by and done nothing while her mother was dying.

It was funny… Orum had been terrified by her callous disregard for the sanctity of human life and her cruel ruthlessness, but Sunny did not see anything wrong with it. Sure, Ki Song did not only kill those directly responsible for stealing her inheritance, but also every bystander who had failed to help Ravenheart…

However, Sunny was not at all certain that he would have been any more merciful if someone's cowardice contributed to Rain's death. In fact, he would have probably been much more ruthless.

That just went to show that the new generations were indeed different from those born before the Nightmare Spell… for better or for worse.

In any case, although Orum's memories did not show what had happened after the massacre in the Jade Palace, Sunny already knew a lot, and could deduce the rest.

In the span of several years, Ki Song had elevated the status of her Citadel to one of the most populous human strongholds in the West. She slowly expanded her sphere of influence, clearing routes through the Dream Realm to connect various Citadels to each other, and became the cornerstone of human forces there, just like Warden of Valor and Bastion were in the East.

At some point, she joined Broken Sword's cohort and challenged the Second Nightmare, becoming a Master and earning wide renown.

Following that, Ki Song defeated the Corrupted Terror ruling the estuary of the River of Tears, opening the path to the Stormsea and strengthening the ties between the West and the East.

Thus helping all Awakened deepen their roots in the inhospitable soil of the Dream Realm.

While Anvil was waging war against the Dark Forest and leading human conquest of new territories in the north, she was busy working on developing the basin of the River of Tears and strengthening human position there. That helped Clan Song soar to the pinnacle of prominence.

…And at some point during those years, she had also found and claimed the divine lineage of Beast God.

Chapter-1944: Footsteps of War

Sunny did not miss the fact that neither Ravenheart nor her daughter had seemed to possess the lineage in the early years of the Nightmare Spell era. At the Academy, Orum had noted that Smile of Heaven and Anvil were exhibiting unexplainable physical prowess and strength… but Ki Song was not.

That was because by then, Immortal Flame had already claimed the Lineage Memory of Sun God, while Warden of Valor had already found the Lineage Memory of War God. Nighwalker, meanwhile, had most likely already gained the Lineage Memory of Storm God.

Sunny did not know how Ki Song earned the Lineage Memory of her own or where, but she definitely had not inherited a divine bloodline, like Smile of Heaven and Anvil did. Instead, she found it at some point after Awakening, just like their parents had.

Then, she followed Broken Sword into the Third Nightmare and attained Sainthood. By then, Clan Song would have already been considered one of the Great Clans.

And then, finally… after both Smile of Heaven and Broken Sword were gone… the Raven Queen would be born in the crucible of the Fourth Nightmare, cementing her power over the world.

It was admirable, really. Sunny could not help but feel awe at what that woman had achieved. He would have applauded Ki Song… if he wasn't planning to kill her, and was therefore at great risk of being killed by her first.

If anything, Sunny would have dearly preferred if his adversary was less outstanding.

He rubbed his face and sighed.

Sunny felt a little conflicted now that the enemy he had been thinking about so much had a face in his mind. Both Ki Song and Anvil — despite how valuable it was to have seen where they had come from, it was harder to hate them after witnessing them as children and inexperienced youths.

But, at the same time, it only made him resent them more. Because he had seen the world of their youth, with all its countless possibilities… and knew what they had turned it into, in the end.

Regardless...

Knowing what he now knew about Ki Song, he felt that he could understand her actions in the war a little better, and maybe even predict what she would do next, to some degree.

Sunny looked at Cassie.

"Her Flaw…"

Although Little Ki had never confessed it to Orum, there were a few hints. Witnessing the old man's memories and knowing how her life would turn out in the future, he could make a cautious guess.

Cassie leaned back in her chair.

"It has to be connected to family, right?"

Sunny nodded.

"Right."

Back then, Ki Song had just lost her mother and faced her First Nightmare almost immediately after. There, she earned her Aspect, and her Flaw.

Her expression had changed subtly when she told Orum that she did not have a family anymore… as if she wanted to say that she would never have one again, either.

Had Ki Song adopted Seishan and other orphan girls because she was unable to have children of her own?

That would be a bitter Flaw to bear for someone that lonely, indeed.

Of course, Sunny could not be sure.

He frowned.

"That is… not exactly what I was hoping for. If that is indeed her Flaw, it won't be easy to exploit."

Cassie sighed.

"But not impossible."

Her expression turned somber.

"You did not miss it, did you?"

Sunny slowly shook his head, knowing what she was talking about.

Perhaps the most important detail of Orum's memories did not have anything to do with Ki Song, actually.

Instead, it had to do with Anvil.

Due to the fact that Ki Song had been a lonesome child and slaughtered everyone who could have known her well, there weren't any people Sunny and Cassie could seek out to learn more about her most important secrets. Even her daughters might not know much about their regal mother.

But it was different for Anvil. Orum remembered that the youngest son of the founder of Clan Valor had been entrusted to his father's comrades soon after Awakening, to be trained by them and gain experience in the Dream Realm.

Those people would know more about him than anyone else. So, if Sunny and Cassie wanted to learn the weakness of the King of Sword, they were the ones that had to be found.

Sunny stared at Cassie with a heavy expression.

"...How many members of the Warden's cohort are still alive?"

She let out a heavy sigh.

"Many prominent Awakened of the First Generation perished while trying to conquer the Third Nightmare, as you know… including Warden of Valor himself. That is why there are so few of them around. As for his cohort — as far as I know, there's only one person left. We must get to him."

Sunny lingered for a moment.

"You're not suggesting that we should kidnap Saint Jest, are you?"

Cassie raised an eyebrow.

"Why? Has the old man's amiable act fooled you?"

Sunny slowly shook his head.

"Not really."

She leaned forward a little.

"Good. Because he is more sinister than you can imagine, and probably the most prolific killer of this era. Worst of all, there are people loyal to Valor, and then there's Jest of Dagonet. His devotion to the King is absolute. So… whether we like it or not, he'll turn his malice toward us sooner or later."

Sunny looked at her with a grim expression.

"That might be true, but he is a Saint and one of Anvil's most trusted people. I doubt that he'll share what he knows voluntarily, so how do you expect us to take him without Anvil noticing?"

Cassie grimaced, then shrugged.

"The war is chaotic. There will be an opportunity, I'm sure."

Her voice sounded determined, but tired. She had been exhausted even before showing Sunny Orum's memories, and her fatigue must have only grown worse as a result.

He closed his eyes for a moment.

There was a lot to think about. He would have to go over everything he had learned, examining each event and every detail for hints he had missed. He would have to contemplate all of it deeply, as well.

Of course… Nephis would have to be brought up to speed, too.

Sunny suddenly looked at Cassie.

"These memories… will you show them to Nephis?"

She nodded silently.

A sigh escaped from Sunny's lips.

"...Good."

These scenes were merely a source of information for them.

But for Nephis, they would be something more.

She had lost her father as a young child, after all. As for her mother, Nephis had never met her at all — the only image of Smile of Heaven she had was that of a hollow shell.

Seeing them like Sunny and Cassie had seen them in Orum's memories, young and happy, would mean a lot for Changing Star… the last daughter of the Immortal Flame Clan.

Sunny sighed, feeling a little happy for Nephis.

But also a little envious of her.

After all, there was no one in the world who remembered his own parents. The only image of them that remained was hidden in his own memory, growing more blurry with each year.

Rising from his chair, Sunny threw one last look at Cassie and turned away.

"Rest well, Cas. And… good job. We indeed learned a lot today."

Leaving her chambers, he descended the stairs and exited the Ivory Tower.

Outside, the warcamp of the Sword Army was boiling with activity.

The war raged on.

In fact…

Now that both Domains had descended into Godgrave, it was about to grow much fiercer.

Chapter-1945: Spreading Domains

The nature of war did indeed change after the invading armies of humanity conquered two of the ancient Citadels in Godgrave.

The authority of the King of Swords now stretched from east to west, covering vast areas of the Collarbone Plain and the Breastbone Reach. Anvil had waged a terrifying battle against the inhabitants of the Hollows after arriving at the smoldering ruins of the Citadel, eventually clearing a safe area around the lake.

The lake itself grew shallow and drained in a few days, though, turning into a nearly impassable marsh.

The Sword Army established a secondary camp above the closest fissure and stationed a formidable garrison to guard the Gateway in the Hollows. From there, they started a tentative exploration of pathways to the remaining two Citadels — one situated far below, in the spine of the dead deity, the other at the very edges of the Sea of Ash, on one of the titanic skeleton's femurs.

Neither were easy to reach, let alone conquer. The path to the Spine Ocean was perilous and hard to navigate, while the dark waters below were home to untold horrors. The femur Citadel in the south was relatively easier to reach, especially considering that the Nameless Temple, the stronghold of the Lord of Shadows, was located on the southernmost point of the Breastbone Reach.

However, the territory of the Cursed Tyrant, Condemnation, lay between the lands conquered by the Sword Army and the Nameless Temple. There were other Cursed Ones dwelling in the Hollows, as well — even the Sovereigns did not dare to provoke those beings lightly.

So, the conquest of the King of Swords was temporarily stalled.

On the other side of Godgrave, the influence of the Song Army was similarly growing.

Seishan and Death Singer had conquered the Citadel in the western part of the Collarbone Plain, finally allowing the Song Domain to descend upon Godgrave… and for the Queen of Worms to appear personally, as well.

The battered soldiers of Song were saved from the depths of despair by the arrival of their Queen. Immediately after appearing, she slew a Great Demon and eradicated the stampede of Nightmare Creatures threatening to swallow the trapped expedition force, rescuing both the exhausted warriors and her two daughters.

And Rain, who had been fighting on the frontline with the Seventh Legion.

The dire pressure on the entire Song Army drastically reduced now that they were supported by Ki Song and her Domain. Their precarious position in the west of the Collarbone Plain had become nearly unassailable, and the territories conquered by them were slowly encroaching on the northern boundary of the Breastbone Reach.

Of course, the Song Army was also aiming for the two remaining Citadels. They had almost no hope of reaching the Citadel in the south before the forces of Valor due to sheer distance, but the one in the spine of the dead deity was still within their reach.

On paper, Song still seemed like the losing side. After all, they only controlled one Citadel in Godgrave, cornered on the western part of the Collarbone Plain.

The Sword Army, meanwhile, controlled three — or two and a half, if one considered the lukewarm loyalty of the Lord of Shadows — its vast sphere of influence dwarfing that of Song and stretching all the way from the eastern edge of the dead deity's collarbone to the southern boundary of the Breastbone Reach.

However, if one looked beyond the mere marking on the map, the strength of the two armies would seem more or less equal.

While the Song Army controlled much less territory, it also possessed many more Saints. More than that, Prince Mordret was still besieging his father's Domain from the south. His seemingly inevitable march north had been halted by the tall walls of Bastion — for now — but no one knew how long Princess Morgan would be able to contain the terrifying power of her traitorous brother.

The outcome of the war was still uncertain, and the future of the world still hung in fragile balance.

Which was good news for Sunny and Nephis, who needed the Sovereigns to weaken each other.

The three leaders of the Sword Army's expedition force had temporarily parted ways.

The Lord of Shadows was dispatched back to the Nameless Temple in order to defend it and prepare raids on the supply lines of the Song Army, just like he had been supposed to do before the fall of the House of Night. Summer Knight was left in charge of the lesser camp of the Sword Army in the Breastbone Reach.

Nephis was eventually sent back to the main camp in order to mobilize the fresh forces there and helm the expansion of the Sword Domain's territory.

It was then that Sunny learned a peculiar fact about the Domains — something that he had not known before.

In his mind, the territory of a Domain had always been strictly dictated by the power of its ruler and the location of loyal Citadels. Sunny had usually imagined the influence of a Sovereign akin to his own shadow sense — as a formless sphere that spread to a certain distance, centered around its source.

Only, in the case of Supreme Domains supported by the Nightmare Spell, their source were the Sovereigns themselves, while each Citadel that belonged to them served as a powerful relay that

increased the reach of their authority.

But reality turned out to be more nuanced than that.

Not only did the Citadels channel the power of the Sovereigns, but each of their subjects anchored at those Citadels was a vessel of their Domains, as well. At least that was what Sunny had surmised after observing the movements of both armies.

Perhaps there was a more complicated process involved, but the truth remained the same — the more ground the soldiers gained, burning down the scarlet jungle and establishing fortified strongholds on the surface of the ancient bone, the further the reach of the Domains spread. The increase was minuscule when compared to the benefit of having a Citadel nearby, but still significant.

Now, the previous orders of both Anvil and Ki Song made more sense to Sunny.

Laboriously conquering the territory between the main warcamp and the fissure leading to the Garden Castle had not been simply for the sake of helping the army entrench itself in Godgrave and provide reliable support for the frontline fighters — it was also to help the Sword Domain stretch, uninterrupted, all the way from northeast to center of the Breastbone Reach as soon as the Citadel was conquered.

Now that it did…

Both armies continued to push the scarlet jungle back and claim more and more land.

The Song Domain was spreading south, toward the territory of the Sword Domain. The Sword Domain was spreading north, toward the territory of the Song Domain.

Which meant that the two armies were going to clash soon.

The scarlet infestation would not be their only enemy in Godgrave for much longer.

…There were still a few days left before that happened, though.

And Sunny was determined to use these few days well. In particular, he hoped to thoroughly explore the unexpected benefits he had earned in the battle against Revel, pushing his mastery of weaving to a new level.

Chapter-1946: Divine Shadow

Although the battle in the Hollows had dealt a heavy blow to the Sword Army, Sunny himself received quite a boon as a result of facing Revel and her true darkness. Robbed of most of his powers, he had been forced to rely on his Shadows to prevail, and discovered a new facet of his Aspect in the process.

That timely discovery had helped Sunny defeat the daughter of Ki Song… but its repercussions were much wider than a momentary triumph. He felt that the ability to augment his Shadows and his Memories personally could potentially propel his mastery of Shadow Dance and weaving to new heights.

In fact, Sunny suspected that he had stumbled onto one of the cornerstones of what a divine shadow like him was meant to be. Not that he was obliged to follow someone else's designs — he had done quite well by being his own independent person so far, after all, instead of acting as a loyal minion of the being casting him.

Even if his Aspect originated directly from Shadow God, it was folly to assume that a long-dead deity had known better what its uses would be in the distant and dire future of the Nightmare Spell.

Still, the discovery held so much promise that it left Sunny impatient, giddy with anticipation, and almost breathless. He felt something that he had not felt in a while — the pure excitement of an explorer. Even if what he was going to explore were the depths of his own power, it was still uncharted territory.

The Lord of Shadows had returned to the Nameless Temple, and Nephis was still on her way back to the main camp of the Sword Army. So, Master Sunless had little to do for now — locking himself in the basement of the Marvelous Mimic, Sunny dedicated himself to research and experimentation.

There were two avenues he wanted to explore.

The first one was his newly discovered ability to augment his Shadows, which allowed him to gain a profoundly deep understanding of their physical nature. It also allowed him a glimpse into the nature of their powers and mindset, albeit to a more shallow degree — for now, at least.

Needless to say, such a source of profound knowledge about how the bodies of his Shadows were built and functioned could potentially do wonders for his ability to construct faithful Shadow Shells, as well as push the intricacy of his control over Shadow Manifestation to a new level.

Sunny suspected that the path to the next step of Shadow Dance lay in that direction.

Right now, his Shells were a crude fusion of emulation and improvisation. His most natural Shell, for example, was the giant version of himself — Sunny knew his own body the best, after all, so reconstructing it was relatively easy.

Which was not to say that it was simple. Many things went into building this powerful Shell, from deep knowledge of human anatomy, material science, and basic physics to more esoteric subjects like souls, essence, and will. Much of that complexity was miraculously solved by Shadow Dance, but the process still required a lot of conscious effort from Sunny.

A Shadow Shell was not a perfect replica of the original, but it was close enough. For example, Sunny did not need to recreate things like the heart, the blood, and the digestive system when turning into the Shadow Colossus — however, he did need to create a semblance of things like bone structure, musculature, tendons, and so on.

That was how the Shadow Colossus was able to move and fight effectively. The foundation was rebuilt, while all the parts that Sunny neglected to shape were substituted by the intricate use of Shadow Control, and the whole Shell was empowered by his essence.

Of course, building such a complicated Shell required him to get

inventive with using Shadow Manifestation, as well. Sunny had gotten quite adept at manifesting shadows in various ways, manipulating not only their shape, but also their physical attributes.

He could easily control such traits of the manifested shadows as rigidity, elasticity, viscosity, density, and so on. He could make them rough or slippery, solid or fluid, dense or porous… of course, there were limits to how sophisticated these manipulations were.

Sunny could manifest a shadow as a liquid, but he could not make it resemble water in all regards. He could make the surface of a manifested shadow slippery, but he could not turn it into actual ice. While sufficient for his purposes, his ability to finely control the physical attributes of shadows was relatively crude.

…This was going to change now.

While augmenting Saint, Sunny had sensed the structure and composition of her stonelike body with stunning clarity, as if it was his own. Even greater than that, really, considering the mystical nature and legendary origin of his taciturn Shadow.

Those turbulent moments alone had given him some insight into how to improve his Shadow Manifestation and potentially build a Shell of a Stone Saint, one superior in quality and faithfulness than any other Shell he had created before. The benefit did not end there, though — on the contrary, that spark of inspiration was merely the appetizer.

Sunny could also augment Fiend, Nightmare, and Marvelous Mimic, learning more about how their bodies were constructed. The more comprehensive examples he had to compare, the more he would be able to understand and infer, and the better his skill would eventually become.

And there lay the source of his excitement...

Because he had Serpent.

And Serpent could assume the forms of thousands of creatures whose silent shadows dwelled in Sunny's soul, waiting to become fuel for his development.

'...I've struck a jackpot.'

What Sunny now possessed was basically a vast library of all kinds of beings, all ready to be studied and fathomed by him. From the Mountain King to the abominations of Godgrave, he could potentially learn from them all.

And by attaining all that knowledge… who knew what Sunny would be able to achieve?

He couldn't even imagine.

Or rather… maybe he could.

Standing in the basement of the Brilliant Emporium, Sunny suddenly shivered. His eyes widened a little, full of shock and fear, glistening with ambition and greed.

'Shadow Dance.'

He had often wondered, of course, what the final form of Shadow Dance was supposed to be. He had already mastered four of its steps, but three still remained, both alluring and elusive.

The first four steps of Shadow Slave were about sensing the essence of a being to shadow their mind, skill, and overall form. The fourth step in particular had allowed Sunny to delve into the physical structure of creatures both deeper and faster, which allowed him to shadow them more perfectly by assuming the same shape as them through the use of Shadow Shell.

But there was a glaring difference between the forms Sunny assumed and the beings he endeavored to shadow.

It was that he could not replicate their Attributes, Aspects, and mystical powers.

He could become a five-meter tall adamantine troll to resemble Fiend, but he could not breathe out jets of infernal flame.

…But what if he could?

If he was supposed to be a divine shadow, then what was the shadow of a god supposed to look like? Was it supposed to only replicate the general shape of the being casting it, or was it supposed to replicate more?

All of it, perhaps?

Overwhelmed by these thoughts, Sunny made a tentative guess about what the final form of Shadow Dance was meant to be. It was the ability to become a true shadow of a being — all of them, including their mystical powers and authorities — not just their shape.

The fifth step of Shadow Dance, then…

Would have to encompass the ability to shadow a being's Attributes.

Some of them, at least.

Chapter-1947: Formlessness

Sunny's theory that mastering the remaining steps of Shadow Dance would allow him to shadow the Attributes and Aspects of other people, as well as profane powers of Nightmare Creatures, was not built entirely on pure conjecture.

Sure, his intuition was telling him he was right, but sadly, his intuition was not what it used to be now that Sunny was cut off from fate.

However, there was also something that corroborated his theory. A piece of information that Sunny had noted a long time ago, but never managed to explain before now.

It was the scope of powers that the Mad Prince had seemed to possess.

The Mad Prince, Sunny's own past self, had been a Corrupted Titan. He had attained Transcendence — or rather, descended into the abyss of Corruption — all on his own. He had also formed the Titan Core in the depths of the Tomb of Ariel, somehow, despite the dire number of shadow fragments that would have required.

Sunny himself was currently facing the problem of how slow the process of building a new Shadow Core was, so he knew very well what the easiest way to absorb a vast amount of shadow fragments would be.

It was to slay other shadow creatures.

So, he had a strong suspicion that the Mad Prince had slain his own Shadows to become a Titan. Considering that none of the Shadows had been heard of by the people of the Great River, that suspicion was all but confirmed.

So, then…

How had the Mad Prince been able to visit Ananke in her dreams and instruct her where to meet Sunny and Nephis? If Nightmare had been killed, then he wouldn't have been able to use the black steed's [Dreamwalker] Attribute.

Unless the Mad Prince had learned how to shadow that Attribute.

It made sense, in hindsight. The vile madman had spent hundreds of years in the Tomb of Ariel, and while many paths to advancing his power were not available there, one path remained wide open — because it depended on nothing and no one except Sunny himself.

It was to deepen his mastery of his own powers.

Sunny did not know how many years exactly the Mad Prince — the last version of the Mad Prince, to be precise — had spent on the Great River. But if his mastery of weaving had grown sufficient to create the mind-boggling Estuary Key, then it must have been a long, long time.

So, he could have mastered more steps of Shadow Dance, as well.

Ananke must have called him a Sword Saint for a reason.

'Crazy bastard.'

While Sunny did not really want to follow in the footsteps of his past demented self, the Mad Prince was proof of what the future held.

Thinking about him made Sunny feel hopeful about the potential of Shadow Dance, but also reminded him to be careful.

'Slow and steady.'

Taking a deep breath, he remained motionless for a few moments, and then summoned Saint, Fiend, and Serpent.

In the next several hours, Sunny conducted a lot of different experiments. He told himself not to hurry, but his excitement and drive were too powerful. In the end, he spent more essence than he

had planned to, and brought himself to greater mental exhaustion than what was wise.

His eyes were still full of excitement, though, despite the fact that these early results were incremental at best.

The first thing Sunny confirmed was that augmenting his Shadows was indeed an excellent method to improve the intricacy of his Shadow Manifestation. The stonelike flesh of Saint, the steel body of Fiend, and the countless shapes Serpent could assume were like a practical guide for making the shadows he manifested more sophisticated.

Of course, it was not an instantaneous success, but rather gradual progress. Sunny would have to practice much more to elevate Shadow Manifestation to an entirely new level — in fact, the sheer amount of practice he would have to undertake was a little daunting. But that was irrelevant. The only important fact was that he had discovered a reliable and effective method of improvement.

With that, the hardest part was already behind him... the hardest part of this one relatively minor challenge, that was.

What came next was actually implementing this new skill to create a more faithful versions of Shadow Shells. For now, Sunny concentrated on two new prototypes — one Shell emulating the Onyx Saint, and another one emulating Fiend. The goal was not simply to copy their outward appearance and body structure, but to bring everything about these Shells closer to the originals.

So, for the Stone Saint Shell, Sunny tried to replicate the stonelike properties of Saint's body. For the Scavenger Shell, Sunny tried to make the manifested shadows comprising it as similar to blessed steel as possible.

It was an entirely new experience for him. He had freely manipulated the properties of his manifested shadows before, making them as hard as tempered steel or as soft as feather down, but he had never tried to emulate a material flawlessly. Augmenting the Shadows with an actively controlled incarnation was certainly of great help, but still, the process was immensely difficult and elusive.

Nevertheless, Sunny was making good progress. He was especially attuned to the traits of Saint's stonelike body — most likely because he was somewhat familiar with them due to his own Onyx Shell. After a while, Sunny was able to make something that might not have been exactly like what he wanted to achieve, but at least resembled it closely.

It was a good result for the first day of experimentation.

Trying to replicate Fiend's steel carapace was somewhat harder, but Sunny had a lot of experience in emulating metals, as well. After all, one of the most persistent uses of Shadow Manifestation in his arsenal was the creation of weapons for him to wield — so, he possessed relevant experience in that field too, just on a more shallow level.

Considering that Fiend had inherited some of his most fundamental traits by munching on Sunny's own flesh all the way back in Antarctica, there were similarities between his towering four-armed body and the Shadowspawn Shell. So, Sunny experimented both with replicating the gluttonous Shadow's form and with modifying his very first Shell to resemble it in a few ways.

In the process, he also spent several minutes standing motionlessly, basking in the feeling of sharing a Supreme creature's ferocious power.

Sunny had a little hope that augmenting a Supreme Devil would instantly reveal the secrets of Supremacy to him, but sadly, that was not the case. Although it was indeed a new and startling experience, Fiend was not a Sovereign.

Creatures like him were different from humans, and followed a different path… and even though Fiend did possess a nascent will capable of influencing the world, he was too young and inexperienced to truly be in command of it. In fact, Sunny felt that his own will was infinitely more robust and domineering than that of his Shadow, even if it lost in terms of potency.

There was also something about the very fact of being a Shadow that made Fiend different from the Great Nightmare Creatures Sunny had

faced before — something that he could not quite explain, but nevertheless felt like a limitation.

Sunny did not dwell on that vague feeling for long, adding it to the pile of unanswered and barely formed questions he would hopefully get to explore later. Instead, he returned to his current experiments.

Next in line… was Serpent.

Sunny turned to the serpentine Shadow and smiled widely, his eyes gleaming so dangerously that it hissed in alarm.

A few hours later, however, Sunny furiously rubbed his temples and let out a frustrated sigh.

"Damn it. Damn!"

Chapter-1948: Familiar Barrier

Serpent was indeed of immeasurable value to Sunny in his endeavor to master the next step of Shadow Dance. Given its ability to assume the form of any shadow resting in Sunny's soul — those equal or inferior to Serpent in Class and Rank, at least — the Legacy Shadow could be used to gain access to a vast repository of shapes for its master to study in profound detail.

As long as Sunny was using an incarnation to augment Serpent, he could experience complete unity with countless beings, from Dormant Beasts to Corrupted Terrors.

In fact… now that Sunny considered it, wasn't Serpent's [Formless] Ability more or less identical to what he was trying to accomplish? What he wanted to achieve was to learn how to mimic not only the outward shape of a being, but also their Attributes and mystical powers. And that was what Serpent had been able to do all along.

The final goal had been in front of Sunny all that time.

The problem, however…

Was that the same obstacle that had prevented him from slowly learning the essence of Serpent's forms with the help of Shadow Dance in the past was preventing him from truly delving into the state of unity with these beings now — the threat of losing himself in the formlessness, forgetting who he was and what separated him from the beings he shadowed.

If anything, the risk was even more dire now, because he was not simply peering into the essence of the alien beings. Instead, he was fusing with them entirely, becoming one with their bestial forms.

Sunny had managed to maintain a strong hold of his sense of self while experiencing the state of unity with Saint and Fiend — perhaps

because they had been born of his Aspect and dwelled within his soul, to begin with. Augmenting Serpent was not a problem, either — it was just when Serpent used [Formless] that he was suddenly overwhelmed by the feeling of otherness.

Sunny persisted for quite some time, then uttered a few curses and called his incarnation back. He stared at Serpent for a while with a grim expression, then clicked his tongue and looked away.

'I am still crippled…'

Being banished from the Nightmare Spell and losing his True Name was still making life hard for him, even after all these years. Sunny thought that he had finally managed to adapt to his fateless existence well enough, but now that an alluring opportunity was right in front of him, his deficiency was showing its ugly head once again.

He remained motionless for a while, then let out another resentful sigh.

'Whatever. I'll find a way to break through this barrier eventually… there are plenty of other things for me to explore right now, anyway.'

In fact, with everything else he had to do, diving into the endless well of knowledge contained within the [Formless] Ability of his serpentine Shadow might have been too much for him at the moment … even with seven bodies, Sunny was in no position to explore it thoroughly just yet.

He continued to experiment with building the Stone Saint Shell and the Scavenger Shell for a while, eventually losing track of time. Sunny even chose to augment the Marvelous Mimic, becoming a transdimensional house for a short while…

That was quite a bizarre experience, to say the least.

If Nightmare had not been busy lulling a Cursed One to sleep, Sunny would have summoned him here, as well.

…Eventually, something thundered in the basement, and the entire Brilliant Emporium shook a little.

Aiko, who had been sleeping on an opulent wooden chair, flinched and floated into the air. Wiping drool off her face, she looked around in a daze.

"What, no way! I wasn't sitting in your precious chair!"

Noticing that there was no one around, she calmed down a little… only to notice that the door to the basement was open, revealing a dark entrance.

An insidious voice resounded from the darkness, making her skin crawl.

"Hey, Aiko… can you come down for a moment?"

The petite woman hesitated a bit, suddenly uneasy.

"Uh, boss…. actually, I have to leave... urgently. My great dog is terribly sick and my family aunt has been run over by a PTV… wait, no, the other way around…"

The darkness spoke again:

"It won't take long. Come down..."

Aiko let out a heavy sigh and glided into the basement with a resigned expression.

Her boss was sitting on the floor with a mad look on his face and a frightening glint on his eyes.

She landed softly on the floor and scratched the back of her head.

"Hey there, boss. I must warn you — If you finally lost it and decided that you want to eat me or some such… I'll be expecting a huge bonus come payday!"

Sunny stared at Aiko with a dumbfounded expression.

"...Who wants to eat you? Tsk, don't flatter yourself!"

He shook his head.

"Honestly, sometimes, I have no idea what is happening in that head of yours... you are such a weirdo. Anyway, don't move. I'll be quick."

Aiko just stared at him in disbelief, as if she had never expected to hear such an accusation coming from him.

Sunny, meanwhile, allowed his incarnation to separate itself from Fiend.

Then, he controlled it to glide across the floor… and wrap itself around Aiko.

The petite girl let out a yelp.

"Ah! What the hell?!"

She subconsciously floated up, this time shooting almost all the way to the ceiling.

Sunny let out a whistle.

"So… this works, too."

Aiko regained her composure, landed, and looked at her small hands.

After making them into small fists a few times, she blinked.

"What the hell, why am I suddenly so strong?"

Sunny took a deep breath.

His Aspect could be used to augment himself, his Memories, his Echoes, and his Shadows. He could also augment inanimate objects, to a degree. But he had never been able to augment other living beings — with the sole exception of Nephis, whom he had been connected to by Shadow Bond before.

Shadow Bond was no more, and although Sunny did not have a master now, he did have a connection to two other people. They were Rain and Aiko, both bearing the Mark of Shadows.

So, Sunny had decided to see if he could augment his followers, as

well.

Amazingly, it worked.

Which was a great thing, because keeping Rain alive in the middle of Godgrave was getting harder and harder, and would get harder still once the two armies clashed in earnest. She did not even have an Aspect, so Sunny was quite happy to find a way to boost her strength.

Looking at Aiko — and staring at himself through her eyes — Sunny grinned.

"Don't worry. That's just a little benefit of being a member of the Shadow Clan. Basically, I used one of my incarnations to fuse with you, thus doubling your strength. No need to stare at me with admiration…"

The petite girl was indeed staring at him. However, the emotion in her eyes was very far from admiration.

"F—fuse with me? Who… bastard, you have some nerve, going around fusing with unsuspecting women without permission! Thanks, but no thanks, I did not assent to fusing of any kind! Defuse me right this second!"

Sunny blinked a couple of times, then recalled his incarnation and coughed awkwardly.

'Right…'

In hindsight, he could have just sent his shadow to augment Aiko without controlling it directly. He just forgot about it in all the excitement.

'Well. That's embarrassing.'

Sunny cleared his throat.

"Whatever. Anyway, you can go… I'll think about giving you a bonus. A small bonus, mind you!"

Aiko opened her mouth, wanting to retort, but he added sternly:

"And, by the way... were you sitting in my chair?"

The petite girl turned around and hurried upstairs.

"I'll be going, boss! My great uncle and my family cat… I mean, my auntie and my dog… anyway, see you later!"

Sunny scoffed and looked at his Shadows.

After a while, he dismissed them, deciding that it was time to switch gears.

'Next, the Memories.'

It was time to delve into the second avenue he wanted to explore.

The first one had to do with augmenting Shadows to advance his mastery of Shadow Dance, while the second one... the second one was inspired by the experience of fusing with Serpent in the Soul Weapon form, and had to do with Memories.

Sunny hoped to advance his mastery of weaving by augmenting them.

Chapter-1949: Sonorous Silver Sunless

Sunny had quite high expectations for the next stage of his experiments. He had been making a living by selling Memories, after all, and was obligated to forge a stellar sword for Nephis.

There were many Saints in the world, and even a couple other people who possessed Divine Aspects. However, he was the only weaver left in existence. There were some who could enchant weapons and craft Memories, but their ability was no more than a pale imitation of his own.

Therefore, what Sunny was going to do now thrilled him even more than the possible advancement of Shadow Dance. It was just that he was a bit tired, so his excitement was calm and focused.

He was going to fuse with his Memories, which would hopefully allow him to learn more about their weaves.

'Let's see…'

He summoned the runes to study his soul arsenal.

Memories: [Silver Bell], [Extraordinary Rock], [Endless Spring], [Weaver's Mask], [Shadow Lantern], [Shadow Chair], [Overpriced Saddle], [Weaver's Needle], [Nebulous Mantle], [Handy Bracelet], [Quintessence Pearl], [Definitely Not Me].

He possessed far fewer Memories now, after being banished from the Nightmare Spell. Still, it was enough for a good start.

The Memories he did possess could be divided into three categories: the ones he had created himself, the ones he had altered… and the two Divine Memories he had received by chance.

Sunny suspected that he would be able to learn the least from the first category, and the most from the last… if he even had the capacity to fathom the infinite sophistication of Weaver's Mask and Shadow Lantern, which was unlikely.

In any case, it made sense. He knew everything there was to know about the weave of those Memories he had personally created, after all. [Shadow Chair], [Overpriced Saddle], and [Weaver's Needle] could be barely called Memories — they were simply objects he had outfitted with the rudimentary enchantments every Memory possessed.

[Handy Bracelet], [Quintessence Pearl], and [Definitely Not Me] were far more complex, each created after he already became a Transcendent. Studying them would be of more use… but probably not as much as studying the Memories initially forged by the Spell.

They were [Silver Bell], [Extraordinary Rock], and [Endless Spring]. Each had accompanied him for a long time.

Then, there was the [Nebulous Mantle], which had a somewhat special origin. Neither Sunny nor the Nightmare Spell had created it — instead, it had been woven by the sorcerers who worshiped Weaver, passed down to Ananke, and eventually ended up being turned into a Memory by Sunny.

And finally, there were Shadow Lantern and Weaver's Mask. Sunny actually did not know how Shadow Lantern had come to be — was it a true relic of Shadow God, or simply a replica of one? He had received it as a Legacy Relic, and since Aspect Legacies seemed to come from the Spell, it would be reasonable to assume that the Spell had created it.

However, another Legacy Relic Sunny had received was the Fragment of Shadow Realm, and even the Spell did not seem to know how to deal with it — to the point that it did not know how to describe the Fragment with runes, and where to place them.

Sunny knew the origin of Weaver's Mask, though. It was indeed a mere replica of the mask the Demon of Fate had personally worn — one of the two granted to the High Priests of the Nightmare Spell in

the distant past.

However…

It had been created by Weaver's own hand. So, it was indeed a true relic left behind by the nebulous daemon, just like the Nightmare Spell itself.

Sunny stared at the runes describing Weaver's Mask for a few moments... then shifted his gaze and glanced at the [Overpriced Saddle].

A sad sigh escaped from his lips.

Chasing away the sudden feeling of crippling inferiority, Sunny raised a hand and summoned the Silver Bell.

A beautiful bell wove itself from sparks of light, its familiar weight making him feel a hint of bittersweet nostalgia.

Sunny closed his eyes for a moment.

[A small memento of a long-lost home, which once brought its owner comfort and joy…]

He rang the bell quietly and listened to its sonorous ringing, then smiled, a hint of sadness finding its way into his eyes.

When the melodious sound of the bell dissolved into silence, Sunny took a deep breath and controlled his incarnation to glide onto the small Memory.

Immediately, his consciousness was split into two states of being.

Sunny was the person who sat on the floor, holding the Silver Bell in his hand.

But he was also the bell being held by the person.

Overwhelmed by the strangeness of this alien feeling, Sunny shuddered.

Because the hand holding him trembled, Sunny swayed and produced a beautiful ringing sound.

'Ah… it's too strange…'

Becoming one with the Silver Bell was even more odd than fusing with the Soul Weapon form of Serpent or with the Marvelous Mimic masquerading as a quaint cottage… much more odd by far. His Shadows were living beings assuming the shapes of inanimate objects, at least. The Silver Bell… was simply the Silver Bell.

It was a thing cast of silver, with no awareness of the world, of itself, or of anything at all — it had no senses, no feelings, no fears, no thoughts, no desires. It just… was.

Sunny's eyes widened, and his expression froze.

He remained motionless for a while, his mind torn between two incongruous and irreconcilable states. Somewhere far away, the Lord of Shadows stumbled midmotion, and a hidden shadow shuddered in the darkness of Rain's tent.

'...Is this what it feels like to be truly insane?'

Who else would be in the state of mind to consider themselves a little bell, if not for a complete lunatic?

Slowly, laboriously, he called upon his many experiences acting as a shadow of alien beings and managed to get a grip on his incapacitated mind. Sunny built a wall around the part of his mind that had become one with the Silver Bell, separating it from himself, and finally exhaled with relief.

"D—damn it… wow."

Sunny had known that he would experience something exceedingly bizarre by personally augmenting a Memory, but nothing could have prepared him for the strangeness of this foreign state of being.

Still, it was illuminating.

Even though the Silver Bell had no senses, no concept of self, and no

way to perceive anything, it still had… something.

A subtle awareness of movement, vibration, and sound.

And underneath it all, something far more conclusive.

The Silver Bell might have been inanimate and simple on the material plane, but beyond that, it was a marvel of radiant light and flowing energy that existed in the vast emptiness of a lightless abyss. After all, it was woven out of soul essence and contained intricate enchantments designed by the Nightmare Spell itself.

Even the [Sonorous] enchantment added to it had not been invented by Sunny, but simply copied from another Memory into the weave of the Silver Bell.

Within it, soul essence flowed according to an elegant, complex, and infinitely ingenious pattern, its movement and pathways dictated by the intricate tapestry of ethereal strings embedded into the nature of the Silver Bell beyond the material plane.

That was its spellweave and the resulting mechanism of its enchantments, shining brightly in the darkness.

And, therefore…

That was Sunny's spellweave and the mechanism of his enchantments.

He inhaled slowly, staring into the distance.

Sunny had seen plenty of weaves before.

But…

He had never experienced being a weave before. He had never felt every detail and nuance of his sorcery so deeply, vividly, and in such a profound way.

His eyes, which were opened wide, suddenly glistened with sharp light.

And deep within them, golden threads shone for a moment, then disappeared into lightless depths.

Chapter-1950: High Sorcerer

Some time later, Sunny let out a shaky breath and sprawled on the floor. His mind felt like it was on fire, and there were a myriad of thoughts swarming in his head.

He had been right!

Using an incarnation to augment a Memory was, indeed, a game changer. The act of fusing with a Memory gave him an entirely new level of understanding of how its enchantments functioned, and how its spellweave caused those enchantments to exist.

It was one thing to see the tapestry of ethereal strings, but experiencing it as a part of himself was completely different.

Before, Sunny could study a weave and make logical conclusions about how its elements functioned, as well as what role each string played in the tapestry. By observing the structure and guiding principles of countless weaves and comparing them to each other, he could deduce the purpose of some of the patterns and weave Memories by recreating them. That was how his career as a sorcerer had started...

and he had made great strides since then.

Sunny had steadily increased the repertoire of patterns he could weave. Eventually, he was even able to understand the principles behind these structure of these patterns, which gave him the ability to change and modify them. Finally, he reached a point where he could weave new patterns, and thus create somewhat original enchantments, all by himself.

However, Sunny had always remained blind to the true essence of weaving. He had discerned how many weaves worked, but he never understood why. In other words, he had only observed the guiding

principles of weaving without ever knowing the underlying reasons for why they were that way.

His experience as a sorcerer had been purely empirical, lacking the theoretical understanding of the inner workings and causality of the sorcery he practiced. He was an alchemist at best, not a chemist.

Now… all of it could change.

Of course, Sunny had not fathomed the elaborate underlying laws of weaving yet. But he had obtained a tool to observe them now — to personify them now — which meant that, given time, he would be able to comprehend and learn them.

When he did…

A soft chuckle escaped Sunny's lips.

If he did manage to grasp the "why" of weaving instead of only just "how", then he would not need to rely on imitation to create enchantments. He would not need a repertoire of weaves and patterns anymore — because he would be able to solve any problem by simply knowing the rules of solving it.

Of course, that would not make Sunny an omnipotent sorcerer in an instant. After all, having the tools necessary to solve a problem was not the same as mastering them. Otherwise, people would have been able to resolve… well… something terribly complicated in mathematics immediately after formulating the rules of arithmetic.

To his shame, Sunny did not know enough about mathematics to come up with an example.

'Why am I even thinking about that?'

Right… he was thinking about it because he had decided to rest a little after his brain almost melted as a result of experiencing the fusion with Silver Bell.

Still.

He had rested enough, already. Hadn't he?

Sitting up, Sunny shook his head energetically… and summoned the Extraordinary Rock.

"Let's see what mysteries you're hiding!"

Sunny did not say that. The Extraordinary Rock said that.

But in the next moment, Sunny had become the Extraordinary Rock.

Immediately, he shuddered.

Somewhere far away, the Lord of Shadows slammed into a pillar while walking out of the Nameless Temple. Elsewhere, a hidden shadow let out a frustrated sigh, making Rain stir a little in her sleep.

'Let's continue!'

***

Sometime later, Aiko returned to the basement, carrying a tray of food. Her boss was sprawled on the floor in a disheveled state, staring at the ceiling with glassy eyes.

She cautiously nudged him with the edge of her shoe.

"Hey, boss. Uh… you're alive?"

Sunny turned his head and looked at her with a frown.

"Which me are you asking? Also, define the meaning of alive. Also... define the meaning of you."

He blinked a couple of times, then shook his head.

"Never mind. Yes, I'm alive. But what are you doing here?"

Aiko let out a sigh and put the tray on the floor near him.

"Here, have some food. I thought you'd be hungry."

Sunny tilted his head a little.

"Huh? Why would I be hungry?"

The petite girl shrugged.

"I mean… you've been locked in the basement for three days without ever stepping out…"

He stared at her for a few moments, then looked down at the food.

It did smell very appetizing…

"It's been three days already? Wow. That's crazy."

Pulling the tray closer, Sunny grabbed the nearest plate and shoved a spoonful of fragrant soup into his mouth.

"Has Nephis returned to the camp, by any chance?"

Aiko watched him eat with a dubious expression, then shook her head.

"Not yet. She's still en route… inspecting the extermination outposts or some such, from what I hear. She'll probably be here in a couple more days."

Sunny nodded.

"Alright. Let me know when that happens… I'll just stay here in the basement until then."

Then, thinking about it, he suddenly pierced her with an intense gaze.

"Wait. How's our war profiteering business coming along?"

The petite girl flinched.

"What?! What war profiteering? There's no war profiteering whatsoever happening here! Just a… a completely benign, officially sanctioned Memory redistribution program, for the glory and benefit of the great Sword Army…"

Sunny waved a hand.

"Yes, yes. Whatever. You should already have at least a small

stockpile of Memories in inventory, right? Waiting to be… redistributed. Lend them to me for a few days. Oh, also!

Tell the Fire Keepers that since I have free time, I can modify some Memories for them, free of charge. There should be at least a few of them still in the camp, right?"

Aiko blinked.

"I refuse."

Sunny froze for a moment.

"What? Why?"

She crossed her arms and scowled sternly.

"Free of charge? What's that? Our services are both exclusive and top-notch, so why should we provide them for free? Dream on!"

Sunny stared at the petite girl for a few moments, then waved a hand.

"Fine, whatever. Just get me some Memories — the more, the better!"

Grinning in satisfaction, Aiko told Sunny to enjoy his meal and flew out of the basement… literally.

He smiled.

"Good…"

Being banished from the Spell, he couldn't directly transfer or receive Memories. Each had to be modified slightly before he could give them away or claim ownership — if the other party was willing, of course.

So, it would actually take some effort on Sunny's part to get the Memories from Aiko.

It was worth it, however, because if he did…

He would be able to augment and study them freely, instantly

gaining more fuel for his current research. Aiko's uncompromising avarice aside, Sunny should have been paying the Fire Keepers for free access to their soul arsenals, instead...

But, no matter.

He hungrily attacked the tray of food, grinning from ear to ear.

'I've made good progress, already.'

In a day or two more, he would probably be ready to put his new knowledge into practice and test the first results of his recent breakthrough.

Therefore, it would be time to weave some Memories…

Chapter-1951: The Nuances of Proper Grammar

It was going to take Aiko some time to prepare the new Memories for Sunny to peruse. In the meantime, he hesitated for a while, looking at the shimmering runes with a bit of trepidation.

By now, he already explored those of his Memories that he had either personally crafted or altered. Two more remained, though…

Weaver's Mask and Shadow Lantern.

Sunny was a little afraid of them.

He had already seen their weave, after all — and it was unlike anything he had ever witnessed. Even the most powerful Memories he had possessed in the past, Estuary Key and the Crown of Twilight, seemed like toys meant for an infant when compared to the unfathomable complexity of the weave hiding within the Divine Memories.

Sunny had almost killed himself a couple of times by witnessing more than mortals were meant to perceive — like the endless tapestry of fate that Weaver's Mask could show him.

He had not been harmed by merely looking at the weave of Divine Memories, sure. But there was a vast difference between taking a look at them and becoming one with them — fusing with the Silver Bell was already a shock, so Sunny was hesitant to do the same with either Weaver's Mask or the Shadow Lantern.

Still, the temptation was too strong.

Finally gathering his courage, Sunny sighed and summoned the Shadow Lantern. Soon, a palm-sized lantern appeared in his hand. It

was made from a black material that felt like stone, but wasn't stone, engraved with intricate patterns that resembled the scales of a serpent. A short chain was attached to a metal ring at its top, similarly black.

The lantern's gate was carved from glossy black morion… needless to say, there was no light shining through it. Instead, the darkness around Sunny suddenly seemed to grow deeper, colder, and more impenetrable.

Shadow Lantern was beautiful, but unassuming — not at all like a relic left behind by a god. Then again, maybe it was exactly the kind of thing that the elusive Shadow God would leave behind.

It also only had a single enchantment… which was both quite simple and dealing with such absolute concepts as endlessness and infinity.

Enchantment: [Gates of Shadow].

Enchantment Description: [This lantern devours light and can contain, and then release, an infinite amount of shadows.]

That enchantment had served Sunny well in the past. In fact, it was one of the most useful and irreplaceable tools in his arsenal.

He remained motionless for a while, studying the dark Memory, then sighed again and controlled his gloomy incarnation to wrap itself around the serpentine stone lantern.

In the next moment…

Sunny let out a horrified yelp and tossed the lantern away. Of course, that did not do anything, so he belatedly remembered to separate himself from the Divine Memory by allowing his trembling shadow to dash away.

The Shadow Lantern fell on the floor and rolled a few times, its chain ringing in the silence.

"Ah… goddammit…"

Sunny found himself laying on the floor, having hit it hard with his

forehead. Of course, his head was quite sturdy, so he wasn't even bruised… the Marvelous Mimic, however, seemed to have received some damage. The floorboard was cracked, slowly repairing itself.

A brick cottage could not really express emotions, but somehow, Sunny felt that he was surrounded by an aura of resentment.

He let out a shaky breath.

'Yeah… I'm not doing that again any time soon.'

Just as he had expected, fusing with a Divine Memory was not something a mere mortal like him was meant to do. His mind was too small, fleeting, and fragile to contain the vastness of the Shadow Lantern's weave, the weight of its enchantment, and the humbling scale of its unseen expanse. The Divine Memory might have appeared no larger than a palm on the material plane, but truly… its essence was far too immense to fathom.

Sunny slowly sat up and let out a low groan.

'At least I didn't start with Weaver's Mask…'

Shadow Lantern was a Divine Memory of the First Tier, while Weaver's Mask… it was a Divine Memory of the Seventh Tier. It had more than one enchantment, as well, woven by Weaver's own hand.

Sunny was suddenly thankful that he was a little scared of his mask, having been traumatized by its [Where is my eye?] enchantment a long time ago. He had used it on several occasions — the last time already as a Saint, to see if he was really free of the Strings of Fate and disconnected from its tapestry. Remembering those times consistently made him shudder.

Of course, fusing with Weaver's Mask would be far more merciful than witnessing fate without the privilege of looking away. His mind would not melt, shatter, and collapse under the pressure… it was just that becoming one with something so much greater than himself posed a high risk of his sense of self being substituted by that thing entirely.

Sunny had no plans of spending the rest of his life believing sincerely

that he was in fact not a person, but a wooden mask instead.

He had come really close to being irrevocably convinced that he was an intricate stone lantern, already.

Shaking his head, Sunny closed his eyes for a moment, then threw a dark look at the Shadow Lantern.

'That was close.'

The experience of fusion with the Divine Memory had indeed been perilous…

That said, it had not been entirely useless.

Slowly, Sunny's expression changed.

Remembering that short moment of being one with the Shadow Lantern, he scrutinized his feelings intently.

He had not really managed to fathom the nuances of the spellweave of the Divine Memory, but he did become briefly aware of its true essence. That impression, although momentary, imparted a much deeper understanding of the Shadow Lantern to him.

And of its single enchantment.

Suddenly, Sunny's eyes widened, and he stared at the glossy morion gate of the stone lantern in utter disbelief.

'No… it can't be.'

And yet, it could.

He was paralyzed by shock.

'The Gates of Shadow!'

Long ago, soon after receiving the Shadow Lantern, Sunny had wondered how it was able to contain a literal infinity of shadows. Where did the shadows he sent into the Lantern really go? He had even sent one of his own shadows inside, learning very little as a

result.

He had also tried to store the Fragment of the Shadow Realm in the small stone lantern, attempting to test if its capacity was really infinite. The Fragment could indeed be sent into the Shadow Lantern — sadly, no matter how hard Sunny tried, it could not be retrieved.

There was no reason Sunny knew why the Shadow Realm's Fragment would not return from inside the Lantern, like all other shadows would, but that was what he had discovered on Alethea's Island. The discovery had crushed his hope of being able to move his piece of a Divine Domain freely wherever he wished.

But now… now, Sunny had a strong suspicion about what the reason was.

It was because the name of the single enchantment of the Shadow Lantern was much more literal than he had thought.

Gates of Shadow… not of the Shadows, but of Shadow.

'Made pale and feeble by the radiance of day, Shadow laughed and rose from the ground...'

That was what the Nightmare Spell called Shadow God in the description of the Lantern.

So, the Gates of Shadow were really the Gates of Shadow God.

Now…

Where would the Gates of Shadow God lead?

Sunny stared at the small stone lantern and its tiny morion door with an expression of horror.

There was only one logical answer.

They would lead to Shadow God's Realm.

Chapter-1952: Choice Paralysis

'It just doesn't end today!'

Sunny stared at the Shadow Lantern with a very strange expression.

Today, he had discovered the key to mastering the next step of Shadow Dance. Later, he had found a way to elevate his sorcery to new heights.

And now, he had discovered that the door to Shadow Realm had been in his pocket the entire time!

Well, alright… technically, these events had happened in the span of several days, as Aiko so politely reminded him. But still.

How was his poor heart supposed to handle this barrage of stunning revelations?

'Who cares about my heart? I have six spare ones anyway…'

Standing up, Sunny approached the Shadow Lantern and carefully picked it up. He studied it silently, a deep frown slowly appearing on his face.

He was pretty sure that his conjecture was correct. In that short moment when Sunny fused with the Divine Memory, the two of them had been one and the same. As a result, he had caught a brief glimpse of what the Shadow Lantern truly was, and what was hidden beneath its surface.

He had not fathomed it entirely, of course, but he had learned enough to understand the nature of the [Gates of Shadow] enchantment.

Sunny was pretty sure that the gate of the Shadow Lantern led

directly to the Shadow Realm.

Which would explain a few things.

For example, why an infinite amount of shadows could enter the Shadow Lantern and then return. Or why the Fragment of the Shadow Realm could be stored inside, but not retrieved.

That Fragment had been torn from the Shadow Realm when some dreadful being escaped it, after all. So, by returning the Fragment to where it belonged, Sunny was mending a rift in the Shadow Realm.

And he wouldn't very well be able to pull the entire Divine Domain out of the Lantern, would he?

Just thinking about these things made Sunny feel incredulous.

'Shadow Realm…'

There had been six Divine Realms in existence. After the seventh Divine Realm — the Dream Realm — was born, it slowly consumed the mortal realms, assimilating them into itself. The same fate befell five of the six Divine Realms, as well… at least according to Wind Flower.

Sunny strongly suspected that the Stormsea was what remained of the Divine Realm of Storm God. Godgrave had most likely been the Divine Realm of Sun God once. Although he had no proof, he believed that the Burned Forest had been the Divine Realm of Heart God. The Divine Realm of Beast God was somewhere in the Song Domain… the Moonriver Plain might have been one of its parts in the past.

And then there was his own world, Earth, which seemed to be the former Divine Realm of War God, the patron deity of humanity.

Five of the Divine Realms were accounted for, but Shadow Realm had always remained a mystery. Where was it? Had it also been devoured by the Dream Realm? If so, in what region of this nightmarish world were the remains of the Shadow God's Realm located?

Sunny had never seen or heard about any place that resembled the

Realm of Shadow. So, he had always been curious where it went.

And now… he could go and find out.

Thinking about it, Sunny shuddered, suddenly overwhelmed by an inexplicable sense of terror.

'Can I? Should I?'

It was easy to answer the first question — yes, he most definitely could.

His shadow had been able to enter the Shadow Lantern all the way back when he first received it. Now that Sunny had Shadow Incarnation and could take direct control of his shadows, he could do it himself.

In fact, he probably could have done it even before Transcending, by using Shadow Step to assume the form of an incorporeal shadow. It was just that Sunny had not been keen on trying, considering that he had known nothing about what was inside the Shadow Lantern, and that there would be no one left behind to summon him back if he did enter it.

Now, however…

One of his avatars could hold the Lantern while another ventured inside. He could maintain at least two avatars indefinitely, as well. And on top of that, the passive use of Shadow Step did not consume his essence anymore, either.

So, the possibility was there.

But Sunny was not sure that he should make use of it.

There was one big reason why he wanted to go to Shadow Realm, and one enormous reason why he was wary of it.

The latter did not really need to be explained. He just needed to look around to know why blindly venturing into a fallen Divine Realm was a bad idea. Godgrave, Stormsea, and Burned Forest — all three places were the definition of being deadly, representing some of the

most nightmarish corners of this already harrowing world.

And although Sunny had no reason to believe so, he felt that the Shadow Realm might just turn out to be the most dreadful of the five fallen Divine Realms, by far.

That said, there was also a very important reason why he felt compelled to explore it, at least a little. It was similarly simple.

It was his absent Titan Core.

Sunny's Aspect was especially cruel as far as saturating one's soul went… which was, perhaps, quite fitting for an Aspect originating from the God of Death. It had always been harder for him to collect fragments than it was for most Awakened, and that difficulty seemed even more dire now that he was a Saint.

Especially because there were no Shadow Creatures around for him to slay — corrupted or not.

But wouldn't it be reasonable to assume that there would be plenty of them inside the ruins of Shadow Realm?

Sunny thought that it would be very reasonable to assume that.

So, entering the Shadow Realm was the most certain way to become a titan he could think of.

If Sunny did become a Transcendent Titan…

Not only would he receive another core, another shadow, and another avatar…

But Serpent would also become one. Which would allow it to assume the shape of the titans Sunny had slain.

The Fallen Titan Goliath, the Winter Beast... having the ability to summon either one would add another trump card to Sunny's arsenal. And he was in desperate need of those, considering that the chance of defeating the Sovereigns in battle still seemed very slim.

A long sigh escaped from Sunny's lips.

"Damnation…"

He had so much to do, already!

He had been planning to start crafting Memories just now. There was also the whole damn war, the necessity to learn more about the Sovereigns between facing them in battle… and Nephis was finally coming back to camp, as well, which meant that he could finally see her again.

Now, the task of exploring a dead god's lightless realm has been added to the pile of things he had to accomplish.

Sunny covered his face with a palm and groaned.

'What the hell?'

He had seven bodies now, so how come he was busier than ever before?!

Shaking his head, he took a deep breath and stared at the ceiling.

For now, the only question was… what was he going to do first?

Sneak into the Shadow Realm or make a breakthrough in weaving?

Chapter-1953: One Small Step for Shadow

Sunny definitely knew what the smart decision would be.

The smart decision would be to concentrate on weaving for now, slowly consider the potential perils of venturing into the Shadow Realm, and make thorough preparations before entering the Lantern.

For example, he had to decide which of his incarnations would explore the Shadow Realm. Would he send the Lord of Shadows and his three companion shadows, to have as much power as realistically possible in the current situation at his disposal there? Or would he send a single incarnation as a scout, to reduce the damage to a minimum in case it was destroyed by an overwhelming threat?

It would also be best to consider many things, do extensive research, consolidate his recent breakthroughs, and make arrangements before passing through the Gates of Shadow.

That said…

'Ah, to hell with it.'

The allure of an unexplored Divine Realm — the Realm of Shadows — was too irresistible. Even though Sunny knew that it would be wiser to remain patient, he could not imagine delving into the slow and meticulous process of crafting Memories without satiating his curiosity and fascination first.

How was he supposed to concentrate on weaving intricate patterns of ethereal strings when there was a portal to a literal Divine Realm resting basically in his pocket? And not just to any Divine Realm, either, but one that had belonged to the very god from whom Sunny's powers originated.

It would be way too hard.

Granted, he had no ambitions of going on a true expedition yet. Rather, what Sunny wanted to do was to take a first look at the Shadow Realm and explore it briefly, simply to know what awaited him there, and from what he would have to protect himself.

With that knowledge, he would be able to prepare for the actual expedition better. He might even want to craft a few specific Memories to help him face the perils of the Shadow Realm, so it had to be done before he dove into weaving.

It had to be done now.

Sunny turned around, walked to the middle of the basement, and outstretched his hand. The Shadow Lantern hung freely from his fingers. Following a mental command, the little morion gate opened, revealing a dark entrance.

He remained motionless for a few moments, absorbed by solemn silence.

Then, he looked down, at his shadow.

"...Well, what are you waiting for? Chop-chop! Get inside."

The gloomy shadow stared at him in shock, then pointed at itself with a finger, as if asking...

"Who? Me?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Why, of course. I mean, who else? What, did you think that I'll banish my original body to the Shadow Realm?"

He scoffed.

"Of course not. That's the Land of Death, you know!"

The gloomy shadow was dumbstruck for a few moments, then lowered its hands… and slowly clenched its fists, staring at Sunny

with a murderous gaze.

Sunny ignored its antics and activated Shadow Incarnation, taking direct control of his shadow.

'Here we go.'

He glided up his leg, onto his arm, and toward the open gate of the Shadow Lantern.

'Shadow Realm...'

In that short moment before entering the darkness within, Sunny considered what he knew about it.

Truly, it wasn't much, and most of what he did know had come from the description of the Fragment.

[When Shadow made death, he has become death. Everything that Shadow swallowed died, and everything that died was swallowed by Shadow. Death was an absolute law, and thus, that which was everchanging was everchanging no more. Time was an absolute law, and thus, that which was everlasting was everlasting no more. Space was an absolute law, and thus, that which was endless was endless no more. Wielding time, space, and death, the gods defeated and bound their enemies.

However, there were those who defied even absolute laws. One of these beings broke free of the Shadow Realm after being swallowed by it, and in doing so, splintered several small fragments of it. This is one of the fragments.]

It was strange, really. The Nightmare Spell seemed to make no distinction between Shadow God, his Domain, his Realm, and death itself. It almost sounded as if the Shadow Realm was located… within Shadow God.

Dying and being swallowed by the God of Death was used interchangeably. Everything that he swallowed died, and everything that died was swallowed by him, thus ending up in the Domain of Shadow… in the Shadow Realm.

So…

'Is Shadow Realm… Shadow God's soul sea?'

The idea did not seem that far-fetched, but it also was not entirely plausible — mainly because Sunny did not know much about the gods, who were unfathomable.

Had the gods even possessed souls of their own?

Had they possessed physical bodies? If so, how had they looked?

Everyone knew that the gods were dead, but where were their corpses?

Godgrave was called so because people assumed that the titanic skeleton had once belonged to a god, but Sunny did not share that belief...

A moment before his incarnation entered the Lantern, Sunny suddenly shivered.

If he assumed that Shadow Realm was indeed Shadow God's soul sea, or at least a divine equivalent of one...

Then, didn't it sound disturbingly similar to his own lightless soul?

After all, the shadows of everything Sunny killed ended up in his soul sea. In a sense, those he killed were swallowed by him, as well.

He remembered the description of the Shadow Realm, too.

'Everything you cherish, everything you nurture, everything that starts with you will one day be mine, be welcomed by me, swallowed by me, and find peace within me. This is the mercy of Shadow…'

The silent shadows contained within the tranquil darkness of Sunny's soul were, indeed... quite peaceful.

His eyes widened a little, and a seed of a thought appeared in his mind.

But before it could blossom and sprout, his incarnation passed through the Gates of Shadow…

And found himself somewhere else.

Sunny gasped.

Chapter-1954: Realm of Shadows

Sunny found himself standing at the top of a tall mound, with a desolate expanse of dark hills stretching in front of him in all directions. There was no grass, no trees, no moss or flowers. No sign of life at all, just stillness and silence.

It was a stark contrast to the dreadful reaches of Godgrave, where everything was consumed by the sprawling vermilion jungle that teemed with hungry, restless, abominable life.

The ground was covered in a soft layer of fine black dust, but felt more solid than a sand dune would.

What made him gasp was not the desolate landscape, however, but everything else he perceived.

...There was light.

He had expected the Shadow Realm to be a land of eternal darkness, entirely lightless and covered by a veil of shadows. However, instead, its dark expanse was illuminated by a beautiful silver radiance, as if resting under a starlit sky… it was just that there were no stars.

Looking up, Sunny saw a black sky. At least he assumed that it was a sky — there was no way to tell. There were no stars and no moon, just a seemingly endless expanse of darkness.

However, there were clouds.

Far in the distance, a vast storm front was moving across the dark plain. That was what Sunny wanted to call it, in any case — in truth, the clouds weren't really clouds, and the storm wasn't really a storm.

The clouds weren't formed from water vapor, but from ethereal light particles, instead. Shining with silver radiance, they moved and swirled, as if carried by ghostly winds. The empyrean currents were like beautiful rivers of starlight that illuminated the desolate land, making the immense, ancient shadows populating it flow and dance.

It was a breathtaking sight.

But, more than that… even from a distance, Sunny could feel the terrifying violence of the radiant storm. It was both daunting and chilling, making him want to dive deeper into the embrace of shadows to hide himself.

It was a storm of light.

'No…'

Not light.

Looking closer, Sunny shivered slightly.

Those sparks of silver light… he recognized them for what they were.

It was soul essence.

The storm raging above the dark plain was a storm of essence.

He didn't quite know what to make of it.

At the same time as his eyes were enthralled by the sight of the beautiful, terrible soul storm, Sunny's other senses were flooding his mind with intense sensations, as well.

There was his shadow sense, of course.

As it flowed in all directions, Sunny felt… at home.

He was surrounded by nothing but shadows, all of them indescribably ancient and unfathomably deep. Their dark depths were so vast that he almost felt lost, and so immense that he almost felt cowed by their scale. Their tranquil, slumbering indifference made him feel calm and at peace.

The shadows were his source element, after all.

Here in the Shadow Realm, Sunny felt more spirit essence than ever pour into his soul, soothing and satiating it. It was to a degree that the rate at which he replenished shadow essence had become swift enough for at least one more avatar to be maintained indefinitely, without causing any loss.

'...That's good.'

Sunny strived to maintain a careful balance between expending and replenishing his essence. Maintaining two avatars at all times — the Lord of Shadows and Rain's companion — was what he could do without constantly draining his reserves. So, knowing that he would be able to send one additional incarnation out to explore the Shadow Realm without crossing the line was welcome news.

'Now, then… should I take a look around?'

There did not seem to be immediate danger around him, but Sunny still remained in the form of an incorporeal shadow for now. He could not see any structures or sense any movement nearby, either.

But he felt uneasy, for some reason.

Actually, it was completely reasonable for him to feel ill at ease. The Shadow Realm was supposed to be the land of death, after all. If everything that died ended up here, then…

The shadows of Unholy Titans and horrors beyond description would be here as well, wouldn't they? Sure, those harrowing creatures were supposed to be already dead… but beings of higher Ranks were often above such limitations.

Had Shadow God not blessed him from beyond the grave?

Come to think of it…

Would the shadows of the gods, and the seven daemons, be here as well?

Sunny shivered and carefully glided a few steps forward, nearing the

crest of the hill.

'Something… is wrong, I think.'

He was feeling rather strange.

There was no pain and no discomfort, but he definitely felt that something about him was not right.

His unease grew stronger.

'What is it?'

Then, he froze.

If Sunny had eyes at the moment, they would have undoubtedly narrowed.

It was because he saw a tiny mote of silver light slowly rise above his incorporeal form, dancing in the ghostly wind. Then, there was another, and another…

Why was he emanating sparks of soul essence?

That did not make any sense. Not only because he was not supposed to randomly leak essence, but also because Sunny had never possessed soul essence, to begin with — he was rather unique, possessing shadow essence instead.

Following an ominous premonition, Sunny summoned the runes and looked tensely at the counter of his shadow fragments.

A moment later, he felt a hint of terror.

His shadow fragments… were dwindling.

The rate was not high, just one or two every moment, but it was unmistakable.

His soul was being drained.

Not, not quite. It was not being drained — instead, it was slowly disintegrating. It was bizarre and beyond reason, but he could not

deny the fact. He was not under a soul attack and was not receiving soul damage, he did not even feel any pain, but his soul was slowly falling apart.

It was being broken down and turned into pure soul essence.

If not for the radiant motes of light, Sunny would not have even suspected anything.

Feeling a sense of terror, he looked into the distance, where the immense soul storm was raging above the dark plain.

A storm comprised of an incalculable number of essence sparks.

If Sunny had hair right now, it would have stood on end.

'D—damnation…'

What the hell was this place?

Following an instinct, Sunny assumed his human form and immediately manifested the Onyx Mantle. A shadow was quite vulnerable, after all, leaving the soul without the protection of a physical body.

Finally, the stream of essence sparks rising above him was cut off.

Sunny trembled and let out a relieved sigh.

'That was close…'

Before he could celebrate his salvation, however, his shadow sense caught a subtle movement a short distance away.

...And then, a black arrow suddenly flashed from the darkness, easily piercing his chest.

Chapter-1955: Rude Welcome

Sunny was in the heart of the Shadow Realm — a place where he was supposed to have an absolute advantage over his enemies. And yet, he had not sensed the smallest of movements up until the very last moment.

It made sense, in hindsight.

Who else could exist in this dark and deadly wasteland other than creatures similar to him?

He only sensed the black arrow when it was already too late to dodge it. Sunny only managed to turn his torso a little, bracing for the impact. He had a faint hope that the Onyx Mantle would protect his body — it was a Transcendent armor, after all, its breastplate designed specifically in a way to deflect blows instead of enduring them directly.

However, his hopes were futile.

The arrowhead pierced his armor easily. It pierced his skin and muscles, as well, sliding between his ribs and biting his heart.

If not for that slight last-moment turn, his heart would have been entirely destroyed. Now, it was merely damaged.

A split second later, the arrowhead exited from his back and scraped against the inner surface of the Onyx Mantle. Having wasted its momentum, it failed to break through the stonelike armor again.

Consumed by pain, Sunny was tossed back by the devastating force of the impact. He flew a dozen meters back, fell into the black dust, and rolled down the slope of the hill at terrible speed. The world spun, and he tasted iron on his tongue.

'Ah…'

The shock of the impact was fierce and violent. Being skewered by the arrow hurt like hell.

Worse yet, Sunny had no idea where the enemy was… and who the enemy was. The initiative was entirely on the side of the unseen archer, and they were at least powerful enough to effortlessly break an exceedingly durable Transcendent armor.

Things did not look good for him.

Of course, there was plenty Sunny could do.

Here in the Realm of Shadows, he was unreasonably powerful… in fact, he felt more powerful than ever before, as if the world itself was infusing him with dire strength.

There was an ocean of shadows around him to manifest. There were his Shadows, as well — Saint, Fiend, Serpent. He could call upon them to protect him. There was Shadow Step, and his ability to move great distances in the blink of an eye.

Even without the support of other incarnations and unable to augment himself, Sunny could try to give the deadly enemy hiding in the darkness a good battle.

However, he did not.

There was a much safer solution, after all.

…Standing in the basement of the Brilliant Emporium, Sunny looked at the open gate of the Shadow Lantern and summoned his incarnation back.

A moment later, his avatar disappeared from the slope of the dark hill and crashed on the floor of the Marvelous Mimic, letting out a muffled groan, sliding a few meters, and colliding with an empty Memory display stand.

Sunny watched the stand with a pained expression.

Both because he was feeling the avatar's agony and because that damned display had cost him quite a lot back in Bastion.

His first tentative foray into the Shadow Realm... seemed to be over, just like that.

'Well. That's not the best homecoming I could have hoped for, I guess. Not the worst though, either…'

Walking over to the avatar, who was sprawled on the floor, Sunny looked down at himself with a dark expression.

He considered the few short moments he had spent in the Shadow Realm carefully.

It was… not what he had expected it to be.

That dark land was nebulous and beautiful, but also somehow able to destroy souls. If not for how durable his own soul was, it might have been damaged far more severely… in fact, Sunny had a sinking feeling that without Soul Weave, the damage might have been irreparable.

On top of that, he had gotten an arrow driven through his chest. His heart had almost been pierced clean through.

In fact, the wound would have been fatal for most humans… even Saints. His avatar was only alive because of Blood Weave, which helped him ignore the damage dealt to his heart and keep the blood running through his veins.

For now.

The avatar stared back at him from below, his face pale and his lips red with blood.

Sunny sighed.

"What are you waiting for, fool? Hurry up and turn back into a shadow."

That would not heal his wound, but it would at least prevent the

wound from killing his body.

The avatar gritted his teeth, lingered for a moment, and then said in a resentful tone:

"Go to hell, you smug bastard!"

Sunny smiled pleasantly.

Berating himself was still fun.

"We're already in hell, though."

With that, he released control of his incarnation and allowed the avatar to become a shadow once again.

Gloomy was a little damaged and seemed rattled by the whole experience, but at least it wasn't vomiting blood.

Sunny sighed and looked at the ceiling.

'I'll… need to think a bit before venturing into the Shadow Realm again.'

He lowered his gaze and looked at darkness hiding behind the open gate of the Shadow Lantern.

His thoughts returned to what he had seen, sensed, and experienced on the other side. It was a little bit overwhelming. However...

Sunny had a feeling that there was something in particular that he was missing at the moment.

Something important.

As a scowl appeared on his face, his shadow stirred on the floor.

In the next moment, Sunny's eyes widened, and he reeled back.

Almost at the same time, there was a quiet rustle, and another black arrow suddenly shot out of the gate of the Shadow Lantern, missing his head by a hair's breadth.

It struck the ceiling above, tearing a hole in it and making the Marvelous Mimic shudder.

'It… it can follow!'

Stunned and terrified, Sunny fell on his back. He froze for a moment, dazed, and then hurriedly slammed the gate of the Shadow Lantern shut.

A few moments passed in tense silence, but nothing else happened.

The basement of the Brilliant Emporium was silent and peaceful.

…Sunny's mind, however, was anything but.

Staring at the Shadow Lantern with a pale face, he inhaled sharply, and then slowly breathed out.

'What… what the hell have I almost brought back from that cursed place?'

Chapter-1956: Consider Death

In the end, Sunny lost more than he gained from his first venture into the Shadow Realm.

He had gained precious knowledge of what awaited him on the other side of the Gates of Shadow… as well as two black arrows, one smeared in his own blood.

After retrieving the second arrow from the ceiling of the dining hall of the Brilliant Emporium, Sunny studied them both with a dark expression.

The arrows were not enchanted in any way. In fact, they looked quite simple, almost makeshift — the shafts were made of dark wood, the arrowheads were cut from obsidian, and the fletching was made from crow feathers. Nevertheless, there was nothing mundane about them.

Just by holding the two black arrows, Sunny could tell that he was holding something mystical. There was a quiet, deadly aura surrounding them, as if the arrows themselves had presence, akin to one a Saint would possess. Each was also much heavier than he would have expected, hinting that the materials used to craft them were not at all ordinary.

Sunny did not know who had crafted these arrows and from what, but taking a closer look at them, he was not at all surprised that the Onyx Mantle had been pierced.

He had created more than enough Memories to know mystical materials when he saw them. The materials used to fashion the two black arrows… were at least akin to something he would have harvested from a Great Nightmare Creature, but somehow even more daunting.

Even the shadows cast by the arrows were a little threatening.

There was something else about them, as well.

Sunny's expression turned even darker when he sensed something familiar about the black arrows.

If he wasn't wrong... they seemed to be imbued with the killing intent of the unknown shadow stalker, etched with their desire to see the prey die.

The arrows carried their own will.

'Well. I'm still alive, aren't I?'

Better yet, he was now in possession of two supremely lethal arrows. Sunny had many uses for something so precious… who knew, perhaps he would be able to return the favor and sink them into the heart of that damned archer one day.

Sadly, he had lost something far more precious in return.

It was not the health of one of his avatars, either…

Grimacing, Sunny glanced at the Shadow Lantern.

It was his ability to use its [Gates of Shadow] enchantment.

Of course, he was still able to send shadows inside or call them back. However, now that the unseen assailant had shown their startling ability to follow shadows back through the gate of the Shadow Lantern, Sunny was wary of opening it again.

Who knew what would crawl out of the Shadow Realm the next time he did? By personally passing through the Gates of Shadow, Sunny seemed to have attracted the attention of at least one creature dwelling there. Now that the shadow archer knew his scent, it would not be impossible for them to wait patiently in the area where the Lantern's led to.

Sunny uttered a quiet curse and dismissed the Shadow Lantern.

Now was not a good time to lose one of his most useful tools. The war was raging on, and the battle with the Sovereigns was drawing

closer with each passing day.

He would have to step into the Shadow Realm and slay the mysterious archer sooner rather than later.

…But not now.

Now, Sunny had to collect his thoughts and pay attention to his other endeavors.

First, his sorcery.

He looked at the destroyed display stand, sighed, and called upon the shadows to clean up the debris.

There was a lot to do, and no time to waste.

As he headed for the warehouse hidden behind the Memory Boutique portion of the Brilliant Emporium's basement, though, Sunny lingered, staring into the distance with a complicated expression.

He was still being tormented by curiosity, wishing to learn the secrets of the Shadow Realm. If anything, his thirst had only grown stronger after witnessing the unforgettable vista of the dark, silent land. But he could wait for a bit before trying to quench it…

Nevertheless, he had to consider something.

He had to consider death.

The soul storm raging in the distance and the strange fact that his own soul had started disintegrating almost immediately after entering the Shadow Realm were obviously connected. In fact, Sunny had an idea of what the storm of soul essence was…

If his shadow had been almost reduced to a whirlwind of essence, then other shadows would be, too. And since the shadows of all living beings that died were supposed to enter the Shadow Realm…

He could safely assume that the soul storm was formed by countless shadows being transformed into essence by the dark expanse of the Shadow Realm.

Countless living beings perished every day across the Dream Realm and the waking world. Just here in Godgrave, the constant cycle of the scarlet jungle extending its tendrils to the surface, giving birth to legions of creatures, and being reduced to ash by the incandescent abyss above would probably send an endless stream of shadows to the empty Realm of Shadow God.

Where they would be slowly ground to dust, turning into swirling rivers of essence.

Maybe that essence was then released back into the universe, giving birth to new life…

If so, then Sunny might have just witnessed the inner mechanism of existence.

He might have seen the true workings of death.

What was death, really?

Death… was a weapon created to fight against the Void and its Corruption.

Death was a tool to bring end to that which had been endless before.

There was this peculiar detail that he had not really considered before. The souls of Nightmare Creatures were tainted by the vile corruption of the Void. And yet, once a Nightmare Creature was slain, the soul shards retrieved from its body bore no signs of Corruption. No Awakened had ever become corrupted as a result of absorbing soul shards.

Which meant that death somehow cleansed the souls of the Nightmare Creatures from the dark taint of the Void, putting an end to it.

But how could one end something that was supposed to be endless?

Sunny lowered his head and rubbed his face tiredly.

Was he thinking about useless things?

Maybe he was…

But then again, maybe he wasn't.

Destroying something might end it, but if a thing was indestructible… then transforming it into something new was a kind of end, as well.

Shadow God had created death, but he had also become death. He swallowed everything that died, and gifted the dead the peace of an end.

Was that peace… the process of being stripped of everything that made a being themselves, grinding their very soul into a river of essence, and releasing that essence back into the world to live anew?

If so, it was a terrifying thought.

But also… a little comforting.

Most of all, it made Sunny think about his own soul, and the shadows that he himself carried within its dark depths.

Was his soul... a weak, tiny seed of a new Shadow Realm?

'Now that is really terrifying.'

Shivering, Sunny threw these thoughts out of his head and walked into the material storage of the Brilliant Emporium with determined steps.

Chapter-1957: Sorcerer's To Do List

Sunny spent the next several hours exploring various mystical materials he had accumulated over the years and considering what, exactly, he was going to craft.

The memories of the Shadow Realm kept creeping into his mind, but he resolutely ignored them and tried to concentrate on the task at hand. Sadly, just as he did, there was another distraction.

It was Aiko, who wanted to know where the large hole in the floor of the dining hall had come from.

Sparing his bewildered assistant a neutral look, Sunny turned back to the shelves and gave her a non-committal shrug.

"Oh, you know. I just happened to find the Gates of Death, by accident, and decided to take a quick look at what was on the other side. It was quite pretty, actually… sadly, my soul kept disintegrating, and someone shot an arrow through my heart. So, I took offense, and left."

He sighed.

"But I sort of forgot to close the door after returning. As you can see… we lost a bit of flooring as a result. And an entire display case! The fancy one with silver inlays and tempered glass…"

His expression turned somber.

His incarnation would heal, and so would the floor of the Brilliant Emporium — it was a part of the Marvelous Mimic, after all. But that display stand was lost forever!

Aiko stared at him for a while, then lowered her head tiredly.

"Uh-huh. I see,"

Her gaze naturally settled on the two black arrows laying on a table nearby. She studied them for a moment, then shivered.

"W—what's that?"

Sunny glanced her way absentmindedly.

"Oh, those? Those are arrows from Death's Realm. By the way, can you go clean the one on the left? I got it wet… you know. With my heart blood."

Then, he scratched the back of his head and added in a doubtful tone:

"Actually, scratch that. Don't clean it… in fact, don't touch it at all. It's imbued with a little bit of death's essence, so who knows what will happen if you do?"

Sunny was a Saint, but Aiko was merely an Awakened. He still remembered almost being killed by a mere glimpse of Nether's killing intent, frozen in the reflections of the Great River. So, it was better to keep these arrows away from her… just in case.

The petite girl gave the black arrows a tense look and took a hurried step away.

"H—ha! You and your jokes, boss. Ha-ha!"

Nevertheless, she then took another step back and even floated up a little.

Glancing at Sunny, Aiko hesitated for a moment, then hastily left the warehouse.

He nodded.

"Probably a good decision…"

With that, Sunny returned to his thoughts.

Weaving. There were a lot of Memories that he wanted to create.

His end goal was the sword he had promised Nephis… a blade to slay the gods. Both figuratively and literally. That sword was meant to accompany her into the battle against the Sovereigns, but Sunny was looking further than that. He was looking to what would happen after the Sovereigns were gone — to the time she would be Sacred, and then Divine.

That was why he wanted to bind the sword to her soul, and that was why he could not start forging it right now. After all, that sword had to be the pinnacle of his current skill as a sorcerer, not a tool to sharpen it.

Aside from the sword, Sunny also wanted to craft a few Memories for himself. He wanted to create several soulbound charms, in particular, so that the [Underworld Armament] trait of the Onyx Armor would be finally put to use again. He had some ideas, but wasn't certain what these charms would be just yet. He also did not know how many of them he wanted to create…

One would be enough, but seven would be better. That way, each of his incarnations would be able to use a unique soulbound charm, and all of them would be able to use the charms simultaneously.

'Do I even have enough imagination to invent seven suitable charms?'

He was still determined to only use Memories for convenience or to better express his own power, not borrow power from the Memories themselves.

In any case, it was too early to think about crafting the charms. He had not even discovered a way to bind Memories to souls yet, anyway — so, planning to forge them was a bit premature.

Then, there was Saint. Unlike his other Shadows, she could use Memories too. Not any type of Memory, though — only weapons and charms. The graceful stone knight had the ability to either manifest weapons from her darkness or augment existing weapons with it. Currently, she was only doing the former, but doing the latter could push her to even greater strength.

And, just like Sunny, her armor could augment the enchantments of a single charm.

Finally, there was Rain. His sister had been suffering a lot since coming to Godgrave. She had endured many harrowing battles, surviving against all odds when surrounded by Nightmare Creatures far more powerful than her… every soldier in this godforsaken place had.

She had also killed quite a number of abominations, and since the Nightmare Spell could not reward her, Sunny had to take its place.

'Right. I owe a few Memories to Rain.'

These ones were probably the easiest for him to forge due to her low Rank. Handing Rain Memories of higher Ranks was… an option, but not a very good one. Both because her pool of essence would be swiftly drained by their power-hungry enchantments and because she would not be able to wield them very effectively.

Plus, she would learn to rely on the Memories provided by Sunny too much, which would stunt her own growth.

There was also the matter of people questioning where a young Awakened with no backing had received Memories of great power. Not only would that cast suspicion on Rain, but there was a slight danger that someone would decide to try taking them from her.

Her safety was already guaranteed by his presence by her side, so Sunny did not want to overdo it with her equipment.

'I'll start with crafting something for Rain.'

That would be a good start, as well as something that would allow him to realize his recent insights.

Chapter-1958: Practice Run

Sunny had a lot to consider.

He wanted to give Rain the best chance of, if not thriving, then at least standing on her own in the war between Song and Valor. The problem was that there were only a handful of individuals in the world who could stand their ground in the sweltering hell of Godgrave.

The rest of them — the Awakened soldiers, the Ascended officers, even the Transcendent generals — were really out of their depth. They were not meant to be here, in the middle of a harrowing Death Zone, and they were definitely not meant to spill each other's blood for the benefit of two callous Sovereigns.

If even Saints could not guarantee their survival in the war, then mere Awakened like Rain could only rely on luck and good fortune to survive. Of course, Rain had her faithful shadow companion to keep her safe… but she did not quite know how far her teacher was willing to go to protect her.

It was so by design. Sunny had intentionally made himself look eccentric and unreliable in front of her, so that she wasn't stifled in his vast shadow.

Still, he could think of a few things that would help Rain in the days and months to come.

'Let's see…'

He thought back to his experiences on the Forgotten Shore, and the Memories he had relied on to survive there.

In a sense, Godgrave and the Forgotten Shore were somewhat alike. The latter was a dire crucible in which the Dreamers of the Dark City

had been forged into unparalleled warriors… those of them who survived, of course. Even Aiko was someone far more dangerous and capable than an average Awakened was, despite her outwardly whimsical and cowardly appearance.

The former was much the same for the soldiers of the two great armies. Those of them who were destined to survive would come out much more fearsome and stalwart on the other side.

So, Sunny could very well look to his own experience to determine what Rain needed the most at the moment.

The nature of the war was also changing. Before, during its early stage, the dangers his sister had faced were predominantly those posed by the Dream Realm itself. The scarlet jungle, the incandescent white abyss above, the hordes of powerful Nightmare Creatures that her weapons could barely harm…

But things would be different now. The two Domains had already established themselves on the bones of the dead deity, which meant that one day very soon, the clashes between their soldiers would become far more frequent. There would be bloody skirmishes, devious ambushes, and large-scale battle fought under the grey veil of clouds.

Fighting against humans was very different from fighting against Nightmare Creatures, especially if Rain was unfortunate enough to face a Master or a Saint on the battlefield.

…Killing humans was also very different from killing Nightmare Creatures.

Sunny himself was not even sure how he would handle the next stage of the Domain war due to that.

No, he could not even call it the Domain War anymore. Now that the House of Night had been wiped out, and the government had been forced to break its neutrality, there was no party uninvolved in the war — the whole world was dragged into the conflict between the King of Swords and the Queen of Worms. Both of the worlds, really… so, it was a World War.

Or a Realm War, to be precise.

He sighed.

Rain's soul arsenal certainly had quality — he had forged her bow himself, after all, and gifted her the Puppeteer's Shroud. There was also the quiver of arrows and the little shadow snake, which could serve her as a melee weapon. However, the collection of her tools and Memories was lacking in quantity…

Mostly because Sunny had been a little negligent in his role as a surrogate replacement of the Nightmare Spell.

'So, what does Rain need the most?'

There were several areas that needed improvement.

The first and the most obvious one was her lacking ability to slay enemies of higher Ranks. Most Nightmare Creatures of Godgrave were Transcendent, so many Awakened were physically incapable of harming them.

Of course, local abominations were also strange, since they were born weaker than most creatures of their Rank, then matured and gained true strength in a matter of days — at least on the surface. That was how the two great armies had been able to push the scarlet jungle back, slaying these Nightmare Creatures before the enemy could come into their natural power.

Nevertheless, Rain could use a weapon that was capable of piercing the hides of even mature abominations with at least some degree of ease.

Considering that her weapon of choice was a bow, that meant arrows.

Sunny glanced at the two black arrows, then shook his head.

If even Aiko wasn't safe handling them, Rain wouldn't be, either.

The second area that needed improvement was Rain's defense.

The Puppeteer's Shroud was a good armor, but it wasn't the most

durable of them. Its main benefits were that it was light, sufficiently resilient, and protected one's mind. Better yet, it had an invigorating effect on someone's mind as well, helping its master deal better with mental fatigue — which was perhaps the most valuable gift Sunny could have given Rain in a dreadful war.

That said, he had not anticipated that she would keep ending up in the midst of a melee so often when transferring the Puppeteer's Shroud. Wasn't she supposed to be an archer?! Why was his sister constantly fighting side by side with that girl, Tamar of Sorrow?

Sunny grimaced and shook his head.

Then again, he had been supposed to be a stealthy assassin, too. Life never went the way one wanted it to go…

The Puppeteer's Shroud had seemed sufficient at the start of the war. But now that the two great armies were about to clash, Rain would be going into battle against humans… against Awakened. She would be exposed to countless Aspects, and those were varied and unpredictable.

So, she needed to both bolster her overall defenses and gain resistances against a varied array of attacks, from relatively simple elemental one to more strange and sophisticated forms of harm.

Lastly, there was the third area… perhaps the most important one.

It was utility and tools.

Sunny had used the Midnight Shard and the Puppeteer's Shroud well on the Forgotten Shore, but if anyone asked which Memories had saved his life the most there… he would have to say that they were the Endless Spring and other utility Memories, like the Dark Wing, Neph's Evertwine, or even the Prowling Thorn.

In fact, if Rain had the Dark Wing during her days as a laborer on a road crew, she would not have ended up almost dying in one of the canyons of the Moonriver Plain. Of course, she had not Awakened yet back then, so it was a moot point.

Sunny hesitated for a while, looking around the crowded warehouse.

Then, he nodded.

'Arrows, defensive equipment, utility Memories.'

He had his work cut out for him.

Chapter-1959: In the Bag

Sunny had woven many Memories in the past. However, today, he had an entirely new goal — weave something entirely new without relying on imitation.

In theory, he was ready for that challenge. His foundation was quite solid — firstly, he had meticulously studied countless weaves, so his mental library of string patterns was sufficiently vast. Secondly, he had spent numerous hours pouring over these patterns, trying to discern how they worked.

These efforts allowed him enough insight to change and modify the weaves he was familiar with however he saw fit… well, maybe not. Although Sunny could indeed achieve a lot, he was still somewhat limited in the scale and scope of such alterations.

For now.

Lastly, there was his new ability to fuse with the Memories in his possession, which allowed him to fathom the connection between the weaves and the enchantments they produced on a much deeper level.

It was that last gain that was supposed to give him the push he needed to break free from his past limitations.

Sunny looked around the material storage, then walked over to the section containing various leathers — which he had made himself from the hides of Nightmare Creatures over the years.

Choosing a roll that wasn't too valuable, he considered it for a moment. Of course, the low value of this leather was relative — Sunny could afford to disregard it, but it would be a real treasure for most Awakened, and more than a few Masters as well.

Nodding in satisfaction, Sunny picked up the roll of leather, then

found a few more materials and left for the workshop. Once there, Sunny unrolled the leather, traced it roughly, and then swiftly cut it. The material was durable enough to resist enchanted weapons, but he effortlessly sliced through it using nothing but his nail.

After that, Sunny got to work.

Sitting down, he manifested four more hands. These shadow hands were responsible for weaving threads of essence, while his original pair was handling the leather.

Funnily enough, Sunny also summoned Weaver's Needle. Today, it had some mundane stitching to do…

Slowly, a leather backpack took shape in his hands. The backpack was on the smaller side, but crafted with utmost care — in fact, it could quite easily compete with the most luxurious leather bags sold by famous fashion designers in the waking world. That was how good his craftsmanship had become…

After paying a ridiculous amount of credits for what would eventually become the [Overpriced Saddle], Sunny had given a solemn vow to never be robbed blind like that again and learn how to handle leather himself. The name of that Memory was not a joke, but rather an expression of his deep, inconsolable anguish!

He continued to focus on his work. When Sunny needed additional tools, he manifested them from shadows. When he needed thread, he used the diamond thread from the Ebony Tower. Eventually, all that was left was to add the clasps to hold the flap of the backpack tightly closed when moving.

Finishing that, he gave the backpack an appreciative look.

"Damn… it's a shame I can't sell you right now."

Aiko already had the combat equipment market on the Valor side of Godgrave basically cornered, but no one said that they could not expand into fashion… people longed to look good even in the middle of an apocalyptic war, after all. Take Kai, for example, who chose his armor based on how pretty it was.

'That fool...'

Shaking his head regretfully, Sunny walked over to a massive chest and opened its lid, revealing a radiant pile of soul shards. Most of his fortune was safely stored in the Nameless Temple, but he had plenty of shards at hand here, as well.

Fishing out a few Ascended shards from the pile, Sunny returned to his workbench. He did not know yet how many anchors his weave would need, so it was better to be safe than sorry.

Then, he summoned the Endless Spring, put it down, and gave it a complicated look.

Sunny had always suspected that the beautiful glass bottle was, at its core, a spatial storage Memory akin to the Covetous Coffer. However, after exploring it recently, he realized that he could not have been further from the truth.

The Endless Spring was… unique, to say the least. In hindsight, it was a truly remarkable Memory, far beyond what other enchanted tools of its Rank and Class were supposed to be. But then again, Cassie — the person who had initially received it from the Spell — was quite an unusual Awakened herself.

Considering that her Aspect was of the almost unheard of Sacred Rank, the Nightmare from where the Endless Spring had come must have been a remarkable trial, as well.

In any case, the Endless Spring could not help Sunny with what he was trying to do at the moment.

The Marvelous Mimic, however, did.

So, Sunny augmented his Shadow instead of the beautiful glass bottle.

He wanted to create a spatial storage Memory for Rain, and for that, there was no better reference point than the Covetous Coffer, which the Marvelous Mimic had been born of.

Sunny closed his eyes and sighed, contemplating the next step… all

the while continuing to weave threads of shadow essence with his additional hands, of course.

Space was an absolute law, so violating it was no easy task. He wasn't sure that there were Memories out there that could achieve that, but if there were, they must have been of the Divine Rank. He was far from being capable of creating something like that.

Luckily, there were plenty of ways to manipulate space without violating its laws.

The original Covetous Coffer had done just that, and the Marvelous Mimic inherited this ability. It contained an independent space within itself — a pocket dimension, basically — and at the same time served as a portal between the larger world and that space. More than that…

Sunny leaned back with a contemplative expression.

In some sense, the Covetous Coffer had also been a soulbound Memory. Not to the same degree as and in a different way than the Mantle of the Underworld, but its capacity to mimic various objects, as well as the volume of its inner space, had depended on the potency of its master's soul.

That was definitely something Sunny had to explore further. Even if he could not repeat what Nether had done with the Mantles, there were still ways for him to achieve the desired effect.

In any case, creating an independent dimension and then connecting it to the world through a Memory was still a difficult task. Sunny was confident that he could do it, if given enough time for research and experimentation… but Rain did not need something that sophisticated, and there was a much easier way.

Chapter-1960: Master Weaver

Sunny could simply trap a bit of space within the backpack, making it much larger on the inside than it was on the outside. Of course, that would create several problems of its own, which he would then need to solve.

For example, there was the issue of weight — a simple Memory like that would be able to contain many items, but it would also weigh accordingly. Having a spatial storage Memory was of little use if its master could not lift it, after all. Luckily, Sunny had long mastered enchantments that manipulated weight. By adding a simplified version of the [Feather of Truth], he would be able to give the backpack the ability to reduce the weight of all items stored inside.

Then, there was the issue of continuity. Effie had actually possessed a spatial storage Memory of her own long before the Black Beast Locket, all the way back on the Forgotten Shore. However, it possessed a glaring Flaw when compared to the Covetous Coffer — once it was dismissed, everything inside was tossed to the ground instead of being safely stored within her soul.

The same would be true for the leather backpack, unless Sunny came up with countermeasures.

'Huh…'

He had to weave plenty more shadow threads, so there was enough time to think.

'Actually… I feel that the answer is hidden in the rudimentary enchantments that all Memories possess. The most basic of them — the ability to dismiss a Memory and manifest it again from essence. If I can somehow make the backpack treat everything stored inside of it as a false Memory… maybe a part of itself? That's worth exploring…'

He mentally planned out the desired enchantments in his head.

Just like with the backpack itself, which was made from leather, but required many little details to be added — like clasps, pockets, decorations, and so on — the fundamental weave also needed many additions to perform well.

There was a lot to think about.

Eventually, though, Sunny took a deep breath and concentrated on the backpack, peering beneath its surface.

He was ready… as ready as he would ever be.

The tentative design of the weave was fleshed out in his mind. Unlike how he had done it before, meticulously imagining every twist and turn of each single thread of essence, Sunny did it differently this time.

Instead of a precise and clear image, the weave in his head was more… abstract. There were clearly defined sections, those that were responsible for the overall structure and framework of the entire tapestry. There were also several precisely mapped patterns, mostly the smaller ones.

However, there were also segments that were loose and vague, more of a concept than a detailed solution.

Those, he was going to finish in the process, following his knowledge, intuition, and inspiration.

Before starting, Sunny cleansed his mind, bringing it to a state of clarity — something he usually only did when going into battle, but which felt strangely appropriate.

Then, he picked up Weaver's Needle and one of the soul shards…

And started to weave.

Sunny started slowly, creating the framework of the weave and its rudimentary enchantments. In the process, he dove deeper into the state of unity with the Marvelous Mimic, exploring its connection to

space.

Of course, the Marvelous Mimic was a Shadow now, not a Memory. But Sunny remembered the spellweave of the Covetous Coffer quite well. By becoming the Mimic, he could mentally connect its traits and Attributes to the corresponding patterns on the Coffer.

'I think… I understand…'

Following an intense spark of inspiration, Sunny entered the state of flow and switched to the conceptual patterns of essence strings he had loosely planned. It was not absolute improvisation… rather, it was a guided improvisation that sought to invent the correct connections between the concepts and elements of the weave he had prepared in advance, forming the functional pattern out of them.

There was a strange, unfathomable, and beautiful logic to weaving that Sunny did not quite understand, but could feel intuitively. It felt close now, just out of reach.

He was the heir of Weaver, after all.

Armed with that intuitive kinship, the deep well of theoretical knowledge he had built, and the state of unity with the Marvelous Mimic, Sunny used all six of his hands to form the intricate patterns of essence threads.

At some point, his eyes widened.

'This… this is it!'

As if by magic, the chaotic mess of strings was slowly forming into a harmonious tapestry, giving birth to order. The correct decisions were just… clicking together. In that moment, Sunny fully felt the nature of a spellweave, where everything was tied together and interconnected.

Resolving one problem led to a solution to another, which hinted at how to deal with two more. Like that, a cascade of understanding was born, helping him deal with dilemmas that he had no prior knowledge of, and pushing the weave to its final form.

'It's… wonderful…'

Finally, many hours later, Sunny let out a long sigh and dismissed the shadow hands, looking at the beautifully crafted leather backpack with satisfaction.

He had succeeded.

He had created a spatial storage Memory — not by copying a pattern created by the Spell, and not even by altering one.

Instead, he had enchanted the backpack simply by having a sufficient understanding of the fundamental rules of weaving, graduating from imitation to originality.

This was his first entirely original Memory.

Sunny smiled tiredly.

'Hell. Am I a bona fide master weaver now?'

His skill was at least on par with that of the unknown sorcerer who had created Ananke's Mantle, and even superior to it in many regards.

And it would only continue to grow.

In fact, he was about to enter a period of explosive growth. The sky was the limit.

Well… maybe here in Godgrave, that phrase was not the best to use.

In any case…

There was one last step left.

Sunny stared at the leather backpack lovingly.

"What should I call you, huh?"

He intended for Rain to use it well.

Sunny scratched his chin.

What was the purpose of a spatial storage Memory?

Obviously, it was to hold things.

Not just hold things, of course, but hold it away from the grabby hands of other humans.

And here, in front of him, was basically a leather bag.

Sunny's eyes glistened, and he raised a finger into the air.

"Ah, I know!"

It was so obvious.

He nodded in satisfaction, as if having arrived at a perfect answer.

"I shall name you… the Bag of Withholding!"

Chapter-1961: Soul of a Poet

Several more days passed… Sunny would have lost count how many, honestly, if not for the fact that two of his incarnations were out there in the world — one marching with the Song Army, the other preparing to raid and destroy its supply lines.

He had spent these days immersed in weaving.

At some point, Aiko delivered a collection of Memories to the basement of the Brilliant Emporium. Some of them she had purchased and was about to resell, some had come from the Fire Keepers. Sunny had to take breaks from time to time to rest his boiling mind, replenish essence, and weave more shadow threads, so he spent his breaks studying these Memories.

With each Memory he fused with, his insights grew.

Almost two weeks had already passed since his battle with Revel. The Marvelous Mimic had long healed the hole made in the floor of the dining hall by the black arrow, and Nephis was set to arrive any moment now.

Letting out a tired sigh, Sunny took a step back and looked at the Memories resting on the workbench in front of him.

The first of them was the [Bag of Withholding], the spatial storage Memory that had helped him advance his sorcery to a new level.

Next to it was a canteen which looked like it was made from green copper, housed in a black leather sleeve with an intricate image of a coiling serpent etched into it. There were some decorative patterns on the canteen itself, as well, all following the same theme.

In truth, Sunny had crafted it from the leftovers scraps of the Huntsman's axe. The canteen was a kind of storage Memory, as well,

albeit quite different from the Bag of Withholding — it could store a great volume of water, as well as purify it. Needless to say, it was his crude attempt at replicating the Endless Spring.

He had called it the [Green Canteen].

…The [Knockoff Endless Spring] had been considered, but eventually dismissed.

Crafting the [Green Canteen] had not taken him a lot of time, actually. However, unlike the original, it had to be filled by hand — so, Sunny sent Aiko to do just that. The canteen could really contain a lot of water, so his poor assistant had to spend an entire day filling it under the confused gazes of the Fire Keepers. They even chased her off the Ivory Island when the water level of the lake started to drop…

The third Memory Sunny had crafted for Rain had a very simple enchantment, but was exceedingly difficult to devise. In fact, in terms of complexity, it might have been the most troublesome of them all, forcing Sunny to really strain himself mentally.

It was a long strip of black silk that could be used as a sash or as a scarf, decorated with subtle embroidery. After thinking for a while, Sunny had named it [In Case of Emergency].

The [In Case of Emergency] was meant to serve as a safeguard against a very particular peril — the incinerating radiance of the white abyss that hung above Godgrave. Its function was indeed simple — if given a mental command, it would instantly turn the person wearing it completely still.

It didn't matter if the person was standing stably on the ground, in the middle of falling over, or even leaping through the air. As soon as the enchantment of the [In Case of Emergency] was activated, they would become frozen in place.

It had taken Sunny a lot of time to construct the weave of this Memory — not only because it demanded much more complexity than one would have anticipated, but also because he had to make it as efficient as possible so that it did not consume a lot of essence.

After all, Rain could potentially topple after a few hours of immobility due to running out of essence, which would render the entire Memory useless. So, Sunny had tried hard, and eventually managed to make the [In Case of Emergency] consume less essence than any Awakened could replenish naturally, thus making its enchantment somewhat passive — as long as it was used by a person of Rain's weight.

That was it for the utility Memories Sunny had prepared. Pressed for time, he had no choice but to eventually turn his attention to other areas.

Next to the neatly rolled sash were three arrows, each possessing a unique enchantment.

They were [Heavy Blow], [Outskirts at Noon], and [Don't Cut Yourself].

All three had black shafts, crafted from the charred wood of the Burned Forest. The fletching and arrowheads, however, were different.

The [Heavy Blow] had grey fletching and an arrowhead forged from dull metal. Its enchantment was a vastly improved version of the [Burden of Peace] — one of the enchantments of the sorely missed [Morgan's Warbow]. Once the arrow pierced the flesh of the enemy, its master could pour out their essence to make it immensely heavy. The more essence was spent, the heavier the arrow would become.

[Heavy Blow] was meant to slow powerful enemies down.

The [Outskirts at Noon] was also meant to debilitate a strong enemy, but in a much more insidious way. Its fletching was white, and its arrowhead was carved out of bone — a shard of bone Sunny had picked up here in Godgrave. Although its enchantment was his original creation, it had been inspired by the [Blessing of Dusk] from the Shroud of Graceless Dusk.

What Sunny had done was store a mental image inside the arrow — a mental copy of the overwhelming disorientation he had experienced after enveloping the outskirts of NQSC with his shadow sense for the

first time. Once the arrow struck true, this terrible cacophony of sensations was projected into the victim's mind, hopefully causing complete sensory overload.

[Outskirts at Noon] was meant to daze the enemy. The master of the arrow could continue to expend essence to sustain the disorienting effect.

Finally, there was the [Don't Cut Yourself]. Its arrow and arrowhead were green, the latter forged from the same metal as the [Beast of Prey] and the [Green Canteen].

Unlike the other two arrows, which were meant to debilitate enemies, this one was meant to kill. It carried a deadly toxin, infecting the blood of those pierced by its sharp arrowhead. The longer the master of the arrow fed the enchantment with essence, the more poisoned the enemy would become.

The harm dealt by the toxin was cumulative, so it was a perfect weapon for Rain, who mostly faced enemies far above her in terms of power. Even though she was much weaker, with enough determination and tenacity, she would be able to slowly kill even the most terrifying of the jungle beasts.

In fact, Sunny had created all three arrows while thinking about how to help his sister deal with Nightmare Creatures that she had no business fighting, and yet had no choice but to fight.

Sadly, the arrows had active enchantments, so she was going to be tactical about when and how to use them. Nevertheless, he would give her effective tools to choose from, at least.

Lastly, there were the defensive Memories he had crafted.

One of them looked quite unassuming — it was a polished piece of volcanic glass hanging on a leather cord. It was a powerful charm that could passively bestow a moderate degree of resistance to elemental attacks upon its wielder, or a high degree of protection if used actively.

Better yet, the master of the charm could limit the scope of what

resistances were active, thus augmenting them even further. As a bonus, it could either cool the wielder down in case of heat or warm them up in case of severe cold.

Sunny had called the charm the [Pièce de Résistance].

…He had no idea what these words meant, exactly, but it sounded fancy and vaguely fitting.

Apart from the charm, Sunny had also crafted a Memory inspired by the chainmail shirt Nephis used to wear — which was a unique piece of enchanted armor that could be worn atop or below other Memories of that type.

The Memory he had devised was designed to augment the defensive properties of the Puppeteer's Shroud, and was made from black, lusterless leather. There was also a lining of light, dark-grey chainmail to make the entire ensemble more durable, effectively adding a second, hidden layer of physical protection to the Puppeteer's Shroud.

He had called it the [Safety First].

These were all the Memories Sunny had crafted for Rain.

His gaze shifted to one more item laying on the workbench.

It was a bracelet much similar to his own.

However… Sunny had not been able to finish it, yet. He needed Cassie's help to complete the weave of this unassuming, but deeply complicated Memory.

'Still… I have outdone myself this time, if I do say so myself.'

A faint smile appeared on Sunny's face.

He couldn't wait to present these Memories to Rain!

There was just one thing that bothered him, though…

Sunny frowned, then summoned the runes and glanced at the list of

his own Memories.

[Shadow Chair], [Overpriced Saddle], [Weaver's Needle], [Handy Bracelet], [Quintessence Pearl], [Definitely Not Me]...

His gaze shifted to the Memories he had crafted in the last few days.

[Bag of Withholding], [Green Canteen], [In Case of Emergency], [Don't Cut Yourself], [Outskirts at Noon], [Safety First]...

He closed his eyes, and let out a quiet sigh.

There was no denying it.

'I guess… I have a poetic soul, too…'

Sunny was starting to understand how he and Rain had ended up with their weird names.

Chapter-1962: Darkest Shadow

Sunny massaged his tired shoulders and yawned. As a Saint — and quite a special one at that — he did not tire easily. Still, this latest marathon had been a little exhausting. From battling Revel to fusing with Shadows and Memories, to weaving without rest for a week straight… his mind was in dire need of respite.

Particularly because neither the Lord of Shadows nor Rain's teacher had any time to rest, either.

Shaking his head, Sunny picked up the [Bag of Withholding], opened its clasp, and stored the rest of the Memories inside. With that done, he finally left the basement of the Brilliant Emporium, expecting to crash onto his lavish bed on the second floor and go to sleep.

However, before that, he walked over to the entrance and returned the Silver Bell to its usual place above the door.

"There. All better."

Sunny stared at the bell for a few moments.

'It's a little funny.'

He had expressed regret about not having a home before, which prompted Noctis — another displaced Saint — to give his heartfelt and thoughtful advice. Noctis himself had built the Sanctuary and made it his home, while Sunny…

Sunny had the Brilliant Emporium.

It really showed how pathological he was, making a home that was literally capable of following him around wherever he went, so that he would never lose it again.

It worked pretty great, though. He was still living comfortably in his cottage despite leaving Bastion and coming to Godgrave, after all.

Sunny smiled.

'...I might be a genius.'

He briefly wondered how the Marvelous Mimic would look one day in the distant future. Would he and Nephis be living together by then? Hopefully, yes.

Imagining an idle life with Neph in this cozy cottage made Sunny's smile widen. Surely, he would have to make some alterations to the interior. She would definitely need a closet of her own… more than that, knowing Neph, she would need a training ground first. Several rooms would have to be added. Another bathroom, an office, a library…

A… a nursery?

Sunny coughed.

But then, his smile dimmed a little.

'Right.'

If the two of them were to even have a future, they would be Supreme. Which meant that Nephis would be a queen — the sole ruler of humanity, most likely, responsible for all the human territory in the Dream Realm and their slowly collapsing homeworld as well.

A queen could not live in a modest cottage.

Sunny sighed.

'It's not a problem, though.'

There was another great thing about the Marvelous Mimic — it could change shapes. The size and intricacy of its shape depended on the potency of Sunny's soul, so by the time he was a Sovereign, his cottage could very well be turned into a palace.

Sunny rubbed his face.

He was thinking about strange things.

'Time to get some sleep.'

Turning around, he headed for the stairs. But before he could reach them, the Silver Bell rang, and Aiko entered the dining hall with a happy smile on her face.

Noticing him, she froze.

"Boss! You're out of the basement?"

'She doesn't have to sound so surprised... it's not like I'm some kind of a basement dweller!'

Sunny studied her for a few moments, then nodded.

"Yeah. Why are you so happy?"

The petite girl grinned.

"Oh… Saint Tyris is finally back at the camp. Which means that there won't be any Cloudbreaks, at least for a while. Bah, they are so annoying… I was on my way to the bathroom the last time one happened, and it lasted for four damned hours!"

Sunny gave her an unamused look.

"Thanks for sharing. I could have done without knowing that last detail, though."

But then, the meaning of what she had said finally dawned on him.

'Saint Tyris is back…'

Sky Tide had been traveling with Neph's party.

Which meant that Nephis was back, too…

His eyes brightened.

'Finally!'

Smiling, Sunny forgot about Aiko, turned around, and headed for the door.

After thinking for a bit, though, he used Shadow Step to jump to the second floor of the Brilliant Emporium.

He had been stuck in the basement for two weeks, after all… and looked accordingly.

Meeting Nephis in such an unsavory state was simply unacceptable.

'First, a shower...'

***

Sunny was understandably excited to see Nephis return… but so was the entire Sword Army.

Currently, it was split between two camps. Most of the soldiers remained in the main camp, while the former expedition force was settling in the secondary camp on the breastbone of the dead deity.

Now that Nephis and her party were back, the deployment of troops would probably change — after all, the very reason why it had taken her so long to return was because she was supposed to have secured a wider and safer path for the soldiers to move between the two camps on the way.

The secondary camp would serve as the spearhead of the war against the Song Army, while the main camp would become its bastion in the rear. Similarly, the troops currently stationed in the depths of the Breastbone Reach were the most experienced soldiers of the Sword Army, having endured the hellish expedition to subjugate the Vanishing Lake Citadel — which was the name people had settled on after Nephis burned most of the Citadel down during the fight against Moonveil.

The ones who had stayed in the main camp experienced plenty of battles, as well, slowly claiming the eastern expanse of the Collarbone Plain and battling the scarlet infestation. However, they only knew

about the harrowing journey of the expedition force and the devastating battle for the Vanishing Lake from rumors.

Sunny did not know who had been responsible for the rumors — the elders of Clan Valor, who wished to bolster morale, or Cassie herself — but they painted quite a heroic picture of Summer Knight, the Lord of Shadows, and Changing Star… especially the latter two.

Although he had spent most of his time locked away in the basement, he still knew what was being said about the Lord of Shadows. If Sunny had not been the nebulous Saint himself, he would have come to believe that the Lord of Shadows was quite an awesome figure.

Mysterious, immensely powerful, and chillingly ruthless. A dauntless warrior who wielded darkness and death as weapons, leading a cohort of dreadful creatures to massacre and slaughter countless hordes of abominations… and, at the same time, a calculating and cunning commander who kept his soldiers alive in the face of most dire odds.

'Well… I am a little awesome, indeed.'

Sunny sometimes forgot how unbelievably powerful he was — which he couldn't be blamed for, really, considering how the caliber of the enemies he faced always seemed to evolve and reach comically unreasonable levels of power faster than he did.

But from the point of view of an ordinary Awakened, the Lord of Shadows would indeed appear as an absolutely monstrous existence, someone whose dark and dreadful power defied all reason and logic.

The soldiers of the Sword Army would naturally feel blessed to have him fighting for their side. The soldiers of the Song Army, meanwhile, would soon learn to be terrified of shadows.

...Luckily, none of them knew that the Lord of Shadows was merely half of Sunny, wielded no more than half of his true power.

If they did, they wouldn't have been able to sleep in peace.

Chapter-1963: Brightest Star

Of course, no matter how much fame the Lord of Shadows had earned, it could not be compared to the radiant renown of Changing Star, the last daughter of the Immortal Flame clan.

It was understandable. By their very nature, one was meant to shine brightly, while the other was meant to stay hidden and unnoticed. Additionally, the Lord of Shadow was still a stranger, while Nephis was the living idol for most of these people.

They had known and admired her family from decades ago, grew to care about Nephis after her incredible feat on the Forgotten Shore, cheered and celebrated when she returned from her long and lonesome journey across the Dream Realm as a Master, and learned to rely on her and her sword in the years that passed since the Chain of Nightmares.

Nephis had a bond with humanity that Sunny lacked.

So, it was natural that the entire camp of the Sword Army was excited to see her return.

Funnily enough… Sunny knew that she was quite popular in the camp of the Song Army, as well.

It was a bit strange, considering that Changing Star was an enemy to the warriors of Song, but also somewhat expected, since the same bond that existed between her and the soldiers of the Sword Army existed between her and the soldiers of the Song Army, too.

Plus, everyone in the Song camp knew that Nephis was the only one among the champions of Valor who had protested the King's decision to declare war on the Song Domain.

Cassie had probably made sure that they did.

As a result, the soldiers of the Song Army did not particularly hate Nephis. They showed anger and contempt when speaking about all the other Saints of the Sword Domain, and especially the King of Swords himself, but harbored no such feelings toward Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan.

Instead, when they spoke of her, there was just… melancholy, and a bit of regret.

It was especially so for Rain. She rarely mentioned Nephis and her companions, but Sunny knew that his sister felt a complicated mess of emotions in that regard — after all, she remembered knowing them, even if in her mind, it was because Effie had briefly lived in a neighboring house.

She remembered being taught by Nephis and Kai, being friendly with Effie, and meeting Cassie a few times. Knowing that they were her enemies now, and that she might meet them on a battlefield one day… was a difficult conflict to navigate.

Then again, that was how every soldier in Godgrave felt. Although the war between Anvil and Ki Song was positioned as a conflict between two independent Domains, it was in fact a bitter civil war at its core.

Everyone knew and valued someone in the other army. Friends had been forced to become reluctant enemies, and in some cases, even family members found themselves fighting on different sides.

That was the nature of being an Awakened — most of them had not chosen the region of the Dream Realm they called home. Instead, the Nightmare Spell had chosen for them, and relatively few were capable of traveling between distant Citadels, let alone crossing the Stormsea, employing the services of a Saint, or gaining access to a Dream Gate to reach the other Domain.

It was the same for Master Orum, whose clan had no choice but to become a vassal of Valor simply because their Citadel was situated in the East. If the Spell had sent him west of Godgrave, he would not have had to become a traitor and die in a dark cell — he would have simply supported Ki Song, his queen, openly and proudly.

So, there were a lot of rumblings in both of the great armies. Now that the initial chaos had settled and the day when humans would have to spill each other's blood was approaching, many felt resentment and trepidation about the entire situation.

But what could they do? The great Supremes had made a decision, and little people like them could not go against it even if they wished to.

Sunny believed that the discontent would only grow worse as the war went on and the wounds it dealt to soldiers mounted, leaving countless scars on their hearts… he was relying on that, actually. The war was an appalling affair, after all, and its horrors would only become more vile in the months to come.

The more disillusioned with the rule of the Sovereigns the valiant warriors of both Domains became, the more willing they would be to accept Neph's regicidal rebellion.

…Judging by how excited the soldiers were to see her return, things were progressing according to plan, at least for now.

The fame and esteem of the Lord of Shadows would help Nephis, as well. The more respected and feared he was, the more legitimate her claim to power would seem — after all, strength was the foundation of legitimacy in this violent world, and being able to lure someone that strong to her side would become the best proof of her personal power.

Sunny had abandoned the Ivory Island and came to the gates of the warcamp to watch Neph's party enter, mixing with the crowd. There were excited voices all around him…

"They're back!"

"Look, it's her! Lady Nephis!"

"Thank the gods, the Fire Keepers seemed to all be alive…"

"Lady Nephis! Lady Nephis! Here!"

"Glory! Glory!"

People were talking about Sunny, as well.

"Wait, where's the Lord of Shadows?"

"He's not coming back, idiot. He returned to his temple to command the western front."

"Temple? Why does that guy have a temple? What is he, a god?"

"Of course not! I mean… at least I don't think he is?"

"He might be…"

Sunny smiled crookedly, but then let out a wistful sigh.

It was as if none of them realized that what happened at Vanishing Lake, while important for spreading the Sword Domain across Godgrave, was really a Pyrrhic victory. Seven Saints of the Sword Army had perished, which was not only a painful loss for humanity, but also the reason why more of these soldiers would die in the future.

Of course, some people knew. The clans to which the fallen Saints had belonged were informed, and the news spread. Nobody had tried to keep it a secret, to begin with, at best trying to direct public attention somewhere else.

To the supposed triumph of Changing Star and the Lord of Shadows, for example, or to the perceived defeat of Dark Dancer Revel and her sisters.

But all of it were concerns for the future.

For now, Sunny simply wished to see Nephis after being separated from her for too many days.

Soon, his smile returned.

'There you are.'

Chapter-1964: Nice Experience

Nephis was walking at the head of the column of tired soldiers, just as pure and radiant as always. Her silver hair seemed to shine in the rays of diffused light that fell through the veil of clouds above, and her slender figure was outlined beautifully by the soft fabric of her white tunic.

Sunny blinked.

'She was not kidding…'

It seemed that Nephis had indeed given up on wearing armor. She would usually be clad in a suit of lustrous steel, looking valiant and knightly, but today, the armor was replaced by a light tunic and leather sandals. It was a much softer look, but also much more eye-catching.

Sunny was not going to complain, though.

The Fire Keepers, who were walking behind her, all looked beaten down by heat, but Nephis seemed fresh and clean, as if she had not spent many days traveling across the perilous surface of Godgrave.

He tilted his head in confusion after noticing beads of water in her hair.

'Why is she so clean, though?'

It was a mystery.

The soldiers around Sunny exploded with boisterous cheers, but he just watched her silently.

Nephis seemed to have sensed his gaze, though, turning her head to look back.

Her lips twisted into a beautiful smile.

The cheers grew louder.

Suddenly, someone grabbed Sunny by the shoulder and shouted into his ear with indescribable excitement:

"H—hey! Did you see that?! She smiled at me!"

Immediately, another voice assaulted his other ear:

"What are you talking about, fool?! Why would Lady Changing Star smile at you? Obviously, she smiled at me!"

Then, there was a third voice:

"No, no, it was definitely me!"

The soldiers were bursting with excitement.

Sunny glanced at them with a grin.

"Yeah. I did see that."

But of course, he knew that they were all wrong.

Sunny looked back to where Nephis was entering the camp.

'She smiled at me.'

It was only for him.

***

After seeing Nephis arrive, Sunny quietly returned to the Ivory Island. Now that Anvil had gone to oversee the defense of the Vanishing Lake and Morgan was away to defend Bastion, she was the only member of the royal family in the main camp of the Sword Army — therefore, it was going to take a bit of time before she was free to return to her Citadel and rest.

In the meantime, Sunny could prepare to welcome her home.

As if by magic, his fatigue seemed to be gone. Instead, Sunny felt full of energy — if not for the occasional yawn, no one would have suspected that he was running on fumes.

'Now, what should I do…'

Sunny longed to spend some romantic time with Nephis, but unfortunately for him, Godgrave wasn't brimming with romantic opportunities. Added to that was the fact that he only vaguely knew what people were supposed to do while courting each other.

The basics were pretty simple… taking walks together, watching movies or theater plays, dining in fine establishments. Visiting museums, going to amusement parks — whatever that was — and attending concerts. Any kind of activity that could allow the couple to spend time together in a pleasant environment and enjoy nice experiences together.

But there was nowhere pleasant to stroll in Godgrave, no theaters, and no dining establishments. No museums, no amusement parks, and no concerts. Most of the time Sunny and Nephis spent together was dedicated to battling hideous Nightmare Creatures, and the experiences they shared, while… sort of nice… were not exactly romantic.

He let out a sigh.

'Damnation.'

Sunny was really limited in what he could do to show his affection. He could make her delicious food, give her thorough massages, and listen to what she had to say.

Which was fine, but he also felt like he was missing something.

Sunny's eyes suddenly widened, and he slapped himself on the forehead.

'Gifts! I missed gifts… damn it, I'm an idiot!'

He should have made her a Memory, as well. Why didn't he think about it before?

It was too late now…

Shaking his head in dejection, Sunny raided the Brilliant Emporium's pantry, then used Shadow Step to teleport to the Ivory Tower and got busy doing one of the few things he could do — preparing a sumptuous meal for Nephis.

She would have grown tired of field rations in the past two weeks, and they had not been eating well during the march to the Vanishing Lake either. So, she would definitely be happy to taste something delicious.

He chuckled while cooking.

'Come to think of it… I've been known to taste wonderful myself. '

That was not an empty boast. Sunny was quite sure that he was truly delicious — otherwise, countless Nightmare Creatures would not have tried to feast on his flesh despite his modest stature and slender build.

If it wasn't because of his refined taste, then why else?

Sunny was so focused on cooking that he did not hear the light steps behind him. It was only when a familiar voice resounded from behind that he flinched.

"What are you laughing about?"

Sunny froze for a moment, then slowly turned around.

Nephis was standing behind him, smiling faintly. Up close, she looked even more enthralling than at the gates of the warcamp, making his heart race.

His heart was racing for another reason, too — because that question could not have come at the worse time!

Sunny gulped, then answered honestly… the only way he could:

"That, uh… I was just thinking to myself. That I should be pretty delicious… taste-wise, I mean."

Neph's smile widened a little, and her striking grey eyes glistened in the sunlight.

She remaining silent for a few moments, and then said in her usual even tone:

"...I'll be the judge of that."

With that, Nephis placed her hands on Sunny's shoulders, and pulled him into a deep kiss.

He wrapped his hands around her slender waist, feeling quite pleased with his answer.

'What can I say? I guess it's true…'

It seemed that they were going to pick up right where they had left off when Anvil so unceremoniously interrupted them on the shore of the Vanishing Lake.

Which suited Sunny quite fine.

Chapter-1965: Slow Burn

Eventually, they ended up sitting at a table across from each other. Nephis was delighting in the meal Sunny had prepared, savoring it with a satisfied smile on her captivating lips. She acted calm and composed, but her face was still a little flushed. Her eyes glistened in the sunlit expanse of the spacious stone chamber.

Sunny, meanwhile, was savoring watching Nephis eat. He just sat quietly, following her movements with his gaze, smiling faintly. He felt content, and his heart was at peace…

Actually, no. It was very much not at peace — instead, it was beating wildly, and he felt as if his entire body was on fire. It took all his willpower to stay still, maintain his composure, and keep the deep, carnal hunger from reaching his eyes.

He really needed a cold shower... a very, very cold shower.

Honestly, it was too cruel. Nephis was inexperienced, and therefore irresponsible with showing him physical affection… did she really expect him to just go and cool down after being set on fire so thoroughly by her touch, her scent, and her lips? Sure, they tasted sweeter than he could describe — but Sunny was a man, and men were not usually satiated by a little taste. In fact, he felt quite insatiable at the moment.

Her presence, which naturally inspired and impassioned desires, was not helping the situation one bit.

Sunny was ready to devour her like a beast.

But, he couldn't.

'Curse it. Why did I cultivate this soft and gallant image? I should have pretended to be a wild and unrestrained shopkeeper instead!'

A quiet sigh escaped from his lips.

'What is this sweet torture?'

Still, he was not in a hurry. He was enjoying the slow burn of their strange romance very much. The flirting, the tender moments of mundane closeness, the exhilarating rush of physical passion… he wanted to savor every second of it.

And, deep down, he was a little reluctant to take the next step already.

Sunny and Nephis were adults, and they both knew what they wanted. However… he was very aware of how differently they viewed each other. Nephis was fond of him, sure. She enjoyed his company greatly, and there was undeniable physical attraction between them.

She might have even begun to develop an emotional connection, learning to care for and depend on him. She certainly trusted him a great deal.

But at the end of the day, Sunny was still a stranger to Nephis. She had only known him for a few months, after all… and while some of the experiences the two of them had shared were quite intense, they could never compare to the lifetime bond that still dwelled in his heart.

A bond that Nephis did not remember.

So… deep down, Sunny hoped that she would at least learn to value him more before their relationship evolved into something more meaningful and irreversible.

Before that happened, he would have to be satisfied with what existed between them now. It was fine… he had waited to be with her for many years, and he could wait a little longer. These little sweet moments were precious enough, and he wasn't going to rush.

As Sunny was thinking about that, Nephis glanced at him with a smile and… and winked innocently.

His body shivered.

'...No, I take it back.'

What was the point of being slow and steady? Fortune favored the bold! He had waited for almost ten years, already, so there was no harm in rushing at all!

If Nephis beckoned him with a finger, he would not hesitate to rush across the finish line right there and then.

The furniture in Neph's chamber might not survive.

Watching his eyes grow a few shades darker, Nephis chuckled.

"You look really funny."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then asked in a slightly hoarse voice:

"Oh? How so?"

She put a grape into her mouth, enjoyed it thoroughly, and then shrugged with a smile.

"It's just that… you're so intense, but also can't stop yawning. It is so cute... I mean, such a contrast!"

She reached for another grape, then seemed to change her mind.

"Have you not gotten any rest lately?"

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'Have I been yawning?'

He hadn't noticed at all.

Suddenly, he was embarrassed.

'I wasn't yawning… before… right?'

Not just embarrassed, mortified!

Sunny coughed.

"Oh… yeah. To be honest, I haven't slept for a couple of weeks. I've been busy working on my sorcery ever since the battle at Vanishing Lake. Right! I created quite a few Memories as practice. Let me show you…"

He was about to summon the Bag of Withholding, but then froze for a few moments.

"Uh… before that…"

With that, he manifested the gloomy shadow into an avatar.

A second later, a second Sunny was standing near the table, wrapped in clothes made from shadows. Nephis looked at him in surprise, and at that moment, the avatar swayed, clutched at his chest with a grimace, and fell to one knee.

The wound dealt to him by the black arrow was refusing to heal. Usually, a Saint would be able to recover from a non-lethal injury quite swiftly, but this one had turned out to be unusually stubborn. Even though it wasn't getting worse, it wasn't getting any better, either.

Which was a real shame, because Sunny would have been able to weave much faster with the help of an additional avatar.

"What happened?"

Neph's voice was full of alarm.

Sunny endured the pain, looked up at her with a pale face, and smiled weakly.

"Well. How do I say this… I visited the Shadow Realm and was shot by an arrow through the heart?"

Her eyes widened.

Nephis remained still for a short moment, and then pushed the grapes away.

"And you are only telling me this now?!"

As a soft white radiance enveloped her hands, Sunny coughed — this time because he was drowning in blood, as opposed to out of embarrassment — and gave her an apologetic smile.

"I just... didn't want… to cause you pain…"

Chapter-1966: Fragile Flowers

Once again, Sunny felt Neph's gentle touch, and a pleasant warmth enveloped his body, washing all his pain away.

The relief was palpable and exhilarating, dazing him for a short moment.

Of course, it was darkened by the knowledge that the pain he was liberated from was at least equal, and very likely much inferior, to the pain Nephis endured for his sake in return.

As the soft radiance enveloping her hands dimmed and was extinguished, she supported the avatar and looked at Master Sunless, who was still sitting at the table.

Her expression was strangely dark for a moment, and then turned stern.

"...No more of that nonsense."

Confused, Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What do you mean?"

Nephis remained silent for a moment, then sighed deeply and let go of the avatar.

Patting him on the shoulder, she rose from the floor and walked back to her chair.

"The sparing me the pain nonsense."

Nephis took a glass filled with fragrant wine, drank deeply from it, and then carefully placed it down.

"If I were wounded and in pain right in front of you, and you had the

power to stop my suffering, would you have hesitated to help me because of a few fleeting moments of agony?"

Sunny shook his head.

"No. I mean… seeing someone I care about suffer would have been quite agonizing, anyway."

Nephis nodded slowly.

"Exactly. So, never hesitate to ask me for help... if you will."

Sunny did not say anything for a while. Then, he dismissed the avatar and smiled mischievously.

"...Is this your roundabout way of saying that you care about me, Lady Nephis?"

She scoffed.

"Seriously… how come I am only ever surrounded by such people?"

Nephis sighed and shook her head in resignation.

"Both you and Cassie. She has this infuriating habit of bottling things up, suffering in silence, and treating me like some kind of fragile flower. I watched her retreat into herself for four entire years, never admitting what was wrong…"

Sunny's eyes glistened.

He knew that Cassie could have been very well hearing this conversation, but could not endure the temptation to share his grievances with a fellow victim of the blind seer's cagey nature.

"Right? She's so secretive! Like, who in their right mind would keep so much to themselves? For years! Vital information, too!"

Of course, he knew that Cassie had most likely only been withdrawn in the last four years because she simply couldn't make Nephis — or anyone, really, except for Sunny himself — remember what she had to say.

And he knew that Cassie's habit of keeping secrets close to her chest was because of the trauma of watching her visions become self-fulfilling prophecies in the most horrible way — Sunny was personally responsible for cementing that trauma in her heart, after all.

But still. Was there anyone who could pass on the chance to complain about a friend to someone who knew them as well?

Neph's eyes glistened with fervor.

"Right! She didn't even tell me that you were the Lord of Shadows! So despicable!"

Sunny opened his mouth to agree, then closed it and coughed.

"Well, that… was my fault, really…"

Nephis looked at him with an appalled expression, but couldn't maintain it for long and laughed.

"Oh, I know."

Then, she lowered her head and gave him a curious glance.

It seemed like she wanted to ask something, but in the end, she did not.

It was only then that Sunny realized that he had let more than he wanted to slip. His words implied that he had known Cassie for a long, long time.

Nephis must have noticed that, but decided to remain silent.

By now, she had to know that there was a strange connection between her and Sunny. But, perhaps because of the conversation they had had once in Bastion, she never pressed him to share the truth.

Sunny was thankful for that, because he knew that he would not be able to answer.

…But at the same time, it pained him, because he wanted for her to ask the question so badly.

It was a strange thing.

Nephis studied his face for a bit, then leaned back and let out a sigh.

Then, she raised an eyebrow.

"So… what was it about visiting the Shadow Realm and being shot through the heart by an arrow?"

Her eyes narrowed.

"...Who dared?"

***

Sunny spent some time telling Nephis about the breakthrough he had made during the battle against Revel, the subsequent experiments he performed, and his brief visit to the Shadow Realm.

The conversation had taken longer than he expected because he had to be very careful with his words. Some things, he could share freely. Some, he had to be very vague about to avoid watching Nephis forget everything he said.

In the end, though, she understood most of what had happened.

Sunny then proceeded to boast about the Memories he had crafted.

"...And this is the [Green Canteen]. At its core, it is a spatial storage Memory — but not a simple one! Of course, I had to manage its weight first and foremost, just like the Bag of Withholding. But that's not all. I was also able to weave an enchantment that allows it to purify water — it can even desalinate it, albeit slowly. Now, that created a problem of its own — how to separate the purified water, the polluted water, and the byproducts of purification, including salt…"

Noticing that Nephis was looking at him with an amused smile, Sunny stopped.

"...What?"

She shook her head lightly.

"It's nothing, Sunny. I'm just seeing another one of your many faces. I've never seen you so enthused about anything, I think."

Sunny's gaze slipped to her lips.

He lingered for a moment.

"I'm sure there was something I was more enthused about."

Nephis laughed.

"Oh, yes… I felt your enthusiasm quite clearly…"

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'What's that supposed to mean?'

Then, he shook his head.

"Well, you're not wrong. We are different, after all, you and I."

Nephis tilted her head a little.

"Different? How so?"

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, looking at the enchanted canteen in his hand. Then, he offered her a faint smile.

"You were born to a family of warriors. You have inherited swordsmanship from your father, and wielding a sword is both your passion and your calling. I, however… only picked up the sword out of necessity. I've gotten quite good at wielding it, true. But if left alone, I would have much preferred to do something else. Like running a Memory store, writing academic papers, or managing a small restaurant."

Nephis seemed surprised by his words.

"Really?"

Once again, it looked like she wanted to ask more. But she held herself back, sensing that he wouldn't answer.

Sunny tried to ignore the awkward pause and nodded.

"Sure. I am not a very brave and virtuous person by nature. If anything, my true nature is fifty percent greed and fifty percent hedonism. Oh, and a little bit of spite."

Neph smiled gently.

"It seemed that you are more remarkable than I thought, then, Master Sunless. Because it takes much more effort to become who you are now while going against your nature."

She sighed.

"It even makes me feel insecure about my own swordsmanship. After all, as you said, it is not only my calling, but also my inheritance."

Hearing that, Sunny froze for a moment.

'Right.'

Her inheritance…

He wanted to spend more time with Nephis, but there was something more important than their reunion.

Sunny hesitated a little, then dismissed the [Green Canteen] and said tentatively:

"About that… I think you should talk to Cassie soon. We have discovered something important. As well as something that might be of great value to you, and only you."

Chapter-1967: Lost Together

Nephis had only just returned to the camp, so she did not know about the memories of Master Orum yet. Sunny selfishly wanted to stay in her company for a while longer, but it was important for her to meet Cassie.

Not only because of the knowledge about the Sovereigns that Orum's memories contained, but also because they were a testament to the lives of her parents.

Broken Sword, Smile of Heaven…

The two of them, who had been the shining stars of humanity once, were long gone. And they had not left a lot behind for their daughter, who carried the weight of their legacy alone.

When Sunny spoke, Nephis nodded lightly and stood up. Placing a hand on his shoulder, she smiled.

"Alright. Wait a little, I'll be back shortly."

With that, she left. Cassie's living quarters were only one floor below her own, so she did not have to go far… however, Sunny knew that it was going to take her quite a long time to come back.

Left alone, he sighed quietly.

Suddenly, the fatigue that he had forgotten about returned, making his eyelids feel heavy.

Sunny remained at the table for a while, picking up a few grapes absentmindedly. Then, he stood up and walked over to the wide balcony, looking at the landscape of the army camp far below.

Neph's chambers were spacious and sparsely furnished. The white

walls were unadorned, and there was nowhere to rest except for the bed hidden beneath a canopy, which fluttered gently in the breeze. Shadows and sunlight were interspersed with open space, creating a beautiful and complicated mosaic.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then sat down on the bed and closed his eyes, intending to let them rest for a moment.

Instead, he simply fell asleep.

His tired body desperately needed reprieve, and so did his overtaxed mind.

So, Sunny decided not to wake himself up. Master Sunless had nothing to do at the moment, anyway. His other two incarnations could pick up the slack.

The Lord of Shadows was preparing to attack the Song Army from the rear. Rain's mercurial teacher was busy hiding from the Queen of Worms while keeping his headstrong disciple safe.

So, he drifted into the soft embrace of sleep.

...After a while, feeling rested and refreshed, he became aware of his surroundings once again and slowly opened his eyes.

It seemed that he had been asleep for much longer than intended. The air smelled of coming rain, and the stone chamber was much darker than before. Considering that there were no nights in Godgrave, it could only mean that storm clouds were gathering in the sky, casting a deep shadow on the war camp of the Sword Army.

Sunny was still in the sweet grasp of sleep, a little. The bed was soft and welcoming, and both his body and mind felt revived. He was in a very good mood.

'The Hollows are going to be flooded again.'

At least the Hollows of the eastern reach of the Collarbone Plain. He did not know how vast the approaching storm would be.

Turning his head, Sunny noticed that Nephis had come back at some

point. She was sitting on a chair a few meters away, looking at the piece of the grey sky visible through the arches of the balcony. Her distant eyes were the same color as the stormy sky, harboring a hint of melancholy.

Watching her, Sunny belatedly realized that he was laying comfortably on her bed, his head resting on a soft pillow. However, he did not move, reluctant to disturb her thoughts.

Nevertheless, Nephis must have sensed his gaze — or maybe something deeper — and turned. Her face remained motionless for a few moments, and was then illuminated by a faint smile.

"You're awake."

Sunny nodded.

"Yes. Sorry… I just closed my eyes for a moment, and that seemed to have powered me down."

She shook her head lightly.

"That's alright. It was… sweet, actually. I got to see another of your faces. You look very different when you sleep."

He raised an eyebrow, hiding his embarrassment.

Sunny had only recently called himself delicious, but really, no one had ever described him as sweet — at least not that he could remember.

His expression wavered for a moment.

'Wait. Was she watching me sleep?'

He wasn't quite sure how to feel about it.

Not the least because it meant that he felt safe enough here to not even bother staying aware of his surroundings with the help of the gloomy shadow.

Glancing at it briefly, Sunny looked back to Nephis and hesitated for

a moment.

"Have you met Cassie?"

She turned to the grey sky again and nodded after a short pause.

"Yes. We learned quite a bit about the Sovereigns. It's… good news."

In the silence that followed, Sunny sighed deeply.

"What about the rest of it?"

Nephis looked up and smiled.

There was a hint of bitterness in her smile.

Eventually, she sighed.

"It is something special, isn't it? Cassie's power. I never thought I'd get to see my mother one day. I mean… how she was before becoming Hollow. I had only ever heard about how bright and wonderful she was from others."

Nephis lingered for a few moments and added, her voice growing a little distant:

"My dad, too. I still remember him, a little — it was not like we were particularly close, though. He was not indifferent or uncaring, just… always busy. And always bleak, even if he tried to brighten up when around me. Looking back, he was really obsessed with what he was trying to achieve. Conquering the Fourth Nightmare, most likely. The apple... doesn't fall far from the tree, does it?"

She sighed.

"It was really strange, to see them like that. Young, radiant, loving, and brimming with hope. I had thought… that it would be a solace, to finally know what they were like. To know that they have not always been just a pair of ghosts. Especially my mother."

She looked down at her hands and added, her voice sounding wistful:

"But to be honest…"

Nephis sighed.

"...In the end, witnessing them only made me feel lonelier."

Sunny remained silent for a while, not knowing what to say.

Everything he wanted to say to her would be forgotten in a few moments, never leaving a mark. So, there was no point.

Eventually, he looked at the ceiling.

"...There is this guy that I know. Who became an orphan early on. He was lonely for a long time, too. But then, he met a girl."

He paused for a few seconds.

"And then, he lost that girl. And then, he found her again, only to lose her again. Come to think of it, I guess it's wrong to say that he lost her — rather, it was him who became lost. In any case, what I am trying to say is… actually, I'm not sure what I'm trying to say."

Sunny smiled.

"I seem to have had some kind of idea when I started talking, but now, I don't know. You don't have to feel like that, I guess."

Nephis chuckled softly.

Standing up, she walked over to the bed and sat down, looking at Sunny from above. There was a strange emotion in her eyes… both bitter and sweet, both powerful and timid.

Perhaps it was longing.

Nephis smiled.

"Well… how does the story end? Was that guy found in the end?"

Sunny answered her smile with one of his own, then shrugged.

"I'm not sure yet. Time will tell..."

She gazed at him deeply, not saying anything.

Slowly, her smile dimmed, replaced by a calm and sober expression.

And the strange emotion in her eyes grew more intense.

Sunny wanted to speak, but before he could, Nephis leaned down and kissed him deeply. Her lips were like flame, setting his heart on fire.

His hands rose, hovered hesitantly near her waist for a moment, and then wrapped around her tightly.

As if intending to never let her go.

Never let her go again.

Responding to her kiss, Sunny pushed himself toward her, and then gently pulled her onto the bed.

A flash of lightning illuminated the world, and somewhere in the distance, a deafening thunderclap shook the world.

However, neither Sunny nor Nephis were aware of the storm, fully and utterly lost in each other.

Chapter-1968: Council of Shadows

Somewhere far away, a titanic humerus bone hung far above the desolate ashen wasteland like a floating mountain chain. It was the right arm of the dead deity that connected Godgrave to the distant Moonriver Plain, as well as to the road leading to Ravenheart.

Not long ago, it had been covered by the scarlet jungle. Now, however, the jungle was gone — the vermilion forest had been obliterated by the soldiers, and the white slope shone blindingly under the radiant, overcast sky.

Then, there was movement.

A small bird suddenly fell clumsily from that sky, colliding with the bone surface at full speed, head-first. The black crow bounced off the ground, rolled a couple of times, then jumped to its feet and shook its tiny head dazedly.

Then, it remained motionless for a while before suddenly bursting into a tide of shadows.

Those shadows surged and formed into the menacing figure of the Lord of Shadows.

Sunny stared at the horizon with an absent expression.

He was supposed to be preparing an ambush for the supply convoy of the Song Army right about now.

But… how the hell… was he supposed to…

He was already lucky to have fallen on the arm of the dead deity instead of plummeting straight into the Sea of Ash. That would have

been... would have been...

What was he thinking about?

Why was he even thinking about anything, to begin with?!

Shaking his head decidedly, Sunny fell backward and crumbled into four bewildered shadows. He had released control of his incarnation, entirely unwilling to split his attention between several bodies... right now.

The shadows looked at each other in confusion.

Nobody was controlling them at the moment, so it was unclear what they were supposed to do.

A few seconds later...

The naughty shadow suddenly threw its arms into the air and performed a triumphant pirouette. Then, it threw a smug, satisfied look at its companions.

The haughty shadow would have usually given its sibling a contemptuous stare, but this time, it charitably held itself back. In fact, it raised his chin even higher than usual, emanating a very subtle feeling of contentment and pride.

As if saying:

"Finally. Everything is as it should be."

Haughty was such an august shadow, after all. It could reluctantly approve of being with a literal princess — their master had done something worthy… for once…

Even the crazy shadow seemed happy. Or… at least excited. It was usually hard to tell what the lunatic felt, but today, it seemed to be in a good mood.

Too good of a mood, maybe.

Only the creepy shadow remained his usual self. No, not quite… he

looked very puzzled by the whole situation. And a little bored.

His emotionless stare seemed to convey a silent question:

"I don't really know what is happening, but weren't we supposed to start killing soon? Hello? Can we concentrate on the important stuff? Hello?!"

Why wasn't anyone listening?

The other three shadows ignored him.

Creepy scratched the back of his head.

Well. It wasn't all bad. At least he was learning new things... about human anatomy.

In fact.

It was quite fascinating.

***

Eventually — quite some time later — the haughty shadow coalesced into the fearsome Lord of Shadows once more.

Only… he wasn't so fearsome anymore.

It was hard to maintain one's ferocity while happily humming a tune.

Sunny only realized that he was humming a few minutes later, though, and forced himself to stop.

However, he neglected to erase the stupid smile from his face. His face was hidden behind Weaver's Mask, anyway, so no one would know.

The other three shadows were giving him strange looks.

Well, the gazes of the creepy shadow and the crazy shadow were strange.

The naughty guy... was quite obvious and expressive.

Sunny grinned.

"Shut up."

He failed to make his voice sound stern, though.

'What does he even know...'

Looking around, Sunny tried to concentrate and glanced warily at the sky. Then, he turned into a shadow and glided swiftly across the surface of the white bone.

He was already running late to his rendezvous…

Some time later, he reached the road built on the dead god's arm by the soldiers of the Song Army. It was hardly a proper road, really — not even a Sovereign could have built something substantial on the nearly indestructible surface of the ancient bone. Instead, logs scavenged from the annihilated jungle were placed on the ground, held in place by tar.

The supply caravans used this road to pull heavy carts up the slope, eventually reaching the crossing to the Collarbone Plain. Now that Ki Song had descended upon Godgrave in person, the Song Army possessed a Dream Gate of their own, so their supply situation was not as bad as it had been before.

But there were limits to what a Dream Gate could achieve. First of all, only cargo from the waking world could be carried through it, most of which was mundane. Secondly, the supply infrastructure in the waking world was a glaring vulnerability — after the fall of the House of Night, no one believed that the war would stay contained in the Dream Realm anymore.

The flow of supplies from the other side could be cut off at any moment, so both armies were working hard to maintain a logistical connection to their Domains.

Sunny's job was to disrupt that connection by harassing the Song Army from the rear.

He had briefly considered destroying the crossing itself, but decided

against it in the end. The crossing was too close to the main camp of the enemy, and to their sole Citadel in Godgrave, as well. The risk of running into someone truly powerful — perhaps even the Queen herself — was too great.

So, he had chosen to start with a single caravan.

Those caravans weren't easy targets, either. The supplies were guarded by both Awakened troops and Ascended officers. From time to time, there would even be a Saint mixed between the soldiers — Clan Song had plenty of those to spare, after all.

Worse still, the carts were being pulled by Beastmaster's thralls, and there were dead pilgrims escorting them.

The Queen had her eyes on the caravans, so Sunny had to be swift about his attack.

He had already lost the chance to be swift due to… unforeseen circumstances…

It was worth it, though, of course — without a shadow of a doubt.

Sunny couldn't stop smiling.

'Focus! There is no time to waste.'

He could already see the head of the caravan in the distance…

But, sadly, he really could not focus at all.

Chapter-1969: Summoned Demon

Master Karna of the Maharana Clan observed the white slopes of the dead god's arm with a somber expression. The abominable jungle was gone, and the caravan was far above the Sea of Ash now. The crossing to the Collarbone Plain was close, so the most dangerous part of the journey was almost behind them.

Yet still, he felt ill at ease.

Perhaps it was because of the radiant clouds above, or because of how desolate the landscape was. Perhaps it was for no reason at all, and he was simply tense because of the heavy responsibility of protecting the caravan.

Although not a grizzled veteran, he was experienced enough to know that the last stretch of a journey was often the most perilous — for no other reason than the fact that people tended to abandon caution once the final destination was already in sight.

His cousin, Saint Dar, had taught him that.

'We ought to stay alert.'

He turned back to look at the caravan.

The sight alleviated his worry, somewhat.

There were more than a hundred heavy wagons being pulled across the crude road, each loaded with precious supplies. Which meant that there were at least a hundred ferocious, towering beasts pulling them — Beastmaster's thralls, most of them at least equal to him in Rank.

Some of the enthralled Nightmare Creatures had come from the

various regions of the Song Domain, some had been subjugated by the Queen's daughter here in Godgrave. They alone were a fearsome force, making the caravan akin to a moving fortress.

But the thralls weren't the only ones defending it.

There were Awakened warriors, as well — two hundred of them. There were a dozen Masters like him. There were also powerful Echoes, and, most importantly of all…

The pilgrims were escorting the caravan, walking silently at its flanks. Although the walking dead made Karna uneasy, they were the heralds of the Queen. As such, they were the best shield he could have hoped for.

The caravan had already experienced several battles on the way to Godgrave, obliterating swarms of Nightmare Creatures lured by the smell of human souls. Each time, the abominations were easily eradicated before reaching the wagons — so, it was hard to imagine that something could threaten him and his soldiers.

'We are already so close…'

Unless a demon climbed out of hell to destroy them, they would make it to the warcamp unscathed.

"Karna!"

The shout of a fellow Master made him flinch and turn around.

He did not need to know what they were warning him about. He could already see.

Out there in front of them, in the distance, a dark figure was standing on the sun-bleached surface of the ancient bone. It had appeared out of nowhere like an apparition, for there had been no one and nothing ahead just a few short moments ago.

'A... a pilgrim? Was someone sent to meet us?'

Feeling a chill creep up his spine, Karna narrowed his eyes.

He saw a fearsome armor that seemed to be carved out of polished black onyx. A frightening mask that resembled the face of a fierce demon, crowned by three twisting horns. The apparition was motionless, looking down. Its long white hair was moving slightly in the wind, like strands of a silken spiderweb.

But then, as if sensing Karna's gaze, the demon looked up, revealing two pools of darkness where the mask's eyes should have been.

Karna trembled.

For a moment, he really believed that his careless thought had summoned a devil from the depths of hell to feast on their souls.

But then, he forcefully composed himself.

"It… it's him."

The Lord of Shadows.

The sellsword Saint who had faced Dark Dancer Revel and survived.

The news of the battle at Vanishing Lake had spread through the Song Army swiftly. Although the daughters of the Queen had ultimately failed to capture the Citadel, they still managed to escape unscathed after killing seven Saints of the Sword Domain.

Karna wasn't particularly happy to know that those great warriors had perished, but he knew that it was a triumphant victory that would save the lives of countless soldiers like him in the future.

Regardless, one of the most extraordinary details about the battle of Vanishing Lakes was the clash between the Lightslayer and the Lord of Shadows. He had not shown his strength before, but now, there was no one in Godgrave who did not know about it, and was not wary of him.

Although very few people in the Song Domain had ever seen him, rumors about the sinister fiend hired by the wicked King of Swords were both abundant and frightening.

Some said that he was a madman whose Flaw demanded that he

revel in bloodshed and slaughter. Some said that he was the last surviving member of a fallen clan, sworn to vengeance against all of humanity. Some said that he was a loathsome killer who had escaped to the Dream Realm many years ago to save himself from being pursued by the Soul Reaper.

Some even said that he was no human at all, but instead a Nightmare Creature masquerading as one. The original vessel of the Skinwalker, perhaps, or of something even more terrifying.

In any case, all the rumors agreed on one thing — that the Lord of Shadows was immensely powerful and utterly ruthless.

Karna gritted his teeth.

Still… he was merely one man.

Even if the Lord of Shadows was a Saint, he was facing an entire army alone. There were two hundred Awakened warriors, two cohorts of Masters, and a hundred enthralled Nightmare Creatures — many of them of the Corrupted Rank — facing him.

There were also the pilgrims.

No matter how powerful, one man could not defeat an army.

Turning to his comrades, Karna opened his mouth, wanting to bolster their spirits and give the command to attack…

But then, he froze.

Something was wrong about the world. Something was terribly, terribly wrong.

Looking down, he felt icy claws grasp his heart.

'...What?'

The closest person to him was a fellow Master — a quiet woman who was a retainer of the royal clan. Everything about her was familiar, except for one thing.

For some reason, the woman had two shadows.

Karna had two shadows, as well.

He stared at the shadows in horror, trying to understand where the extra ones had come from, and what their appearance meant.

Then, he saw two crimson flames igniting in the depths of his own shadow.

...That was the last thing Karna saw.

Because in the next moment, the world was suddenly consumed by impenetrable darkness.

Chapter-1970: Fear of Shadows

Darkness had descended upon Godgrave, where the sun never set. Karna was both startled and, despite not wanting to admit it, scared. He had in his possession a Memory that granted him a night vision akin to that of a nocturnal predator, and yet, he suddenly found himself blind.

Which meant that the darkness surrounding him was not simply a vast shadow, but true darkness instead.

He could not see anything... but he could hear.

There were plenty of sounds.

The roars of the enthralled Nightmare Creatures, the screaming human voices, the clangor of metal, the nauseating crunching of splitting flesh. It all happened in an instant, turning the peaceful melody of creaking wheels into a deafening clamor of battle.

'How can he…'

But there was no time to guess.

Snarling, Karna activated his Awakened Ability. In the next moment, he switched places with an Awakened warrior who had been guarding a wagon a few dozen meters behind.

There was still only darkness, so Karna switched places with another soldier, moving even further back.

'Come on, come on…'

Finally, he escaped into the light.

In front of him, the front of the caravan was swallowed by a pool of darkness. Behind him was chaos — everyone was startled by the

unexpected attack, not knowing what was going on.

There was something different about the state of the caravan, as well.

Apart from those unfortunate souls caught in the pool of true darkness, the rest of the soldiers were alright. So were the thralls of Beastmaster.

However, the pilgrims — each and every one of them —were gone, replaced by tall bonfires. Someone, or something, had set them all aflame in these few short moments.

Karna paled a little and jumped onto the wagon, looking ahead, in the direction where the Lord of Shadows had been standing before.

He saw the sinister Saint almost instantly.

The Lord of Shadows was calmly walking down the bone slope, his steps graceful and unhurried. The back of a black odachi rested on his shoulder, and his white hair was fluttering in the wind.

There were still several hundred meters separating him from the caravan, but the madman was indeed intending to face them all alone.

Karna's eyes narrowed.

If so… he was going to oblige.

Raising his bow, he put some strength into his voice and bellowed:

"It's the Lord of Shadows! Brothers, with me… attack!"

And they did.

The warriors surged forward, the wagon drivers cut the Nightmare Creatures loose, allowing them to rush at the Valor's hired fiend in a murderous frenzy. Arrows streaked across the sky, and scores of Aspect Abilities were unleashed.

The sight of it was daunting.

However, in the next moment, Karna felt his mouth turning dry.

It was because countless shadows suddenly moved all around them, coming alive.

The light of day seemed dimmer now, the darkness deeper.

Some of the shadows shot from the ground, turning into needle-sharp spikes — they pierced the bodies of Beastmaster's thralls. Some turned into black chains that slithered across the ground, binding soldiers and pulling them down.

Some even turned into black hands, each with seven fingers that ended in sharp claws, blocking the Aspect Abilities.

Blood spilled on the white bone, a terrible cacophony of screams permeated the air, and several wagons were split apart by the unleashed violence.

Karna growled.

"Curse you!"

A Saint was a powerful existence, but not an invulnerable one. They still bled like humans, and could be killed by humans.

All it would take was one sword that struck true, one arrow that bypassed the enemy's onyx armor…

Nocking an arrow on the string of his bow, Karna activated both its enchantment and his Ascended Ability, then drew it and took aim.

'Come on!'

He was far inferior to Saint Dar in terms of archery. But he was still better and far more deadly than almost any other archer out there.

And so…

Karna let his arrow loose.

It shot forward at terrible speed… and disappeared.

A split second later, though, it emerged out of nowhere mere meters away from the Lord of Shadows, ready to plunge into the eye of his fierce mask a split second later.

Its instantaneous arrival was both bizarre and insidious, and it left the enemy no time to react.

However…

Even though the Lord of Shadow could not have predicted what would happen, and had only a fraction of a second to move, he still did.

In the next moment, his hand shot upward and caught Karna's arrow, holding it a few centimeters away from his eye.

Karna staggered back.

'I—impossible…'

But a heartbeat later, the Lord of Shadows was suddenly standing in front of him.

'He…'

Karna's eyes widened.

He had followed the arrow back. Had he... stolen Karna's Ascended Ability?

Just like he had stolen Princess Revel's true darkness.

"He's here! Fight!"

The black odachi moved.

In the next few minutes, Karna witnessed a scene of pure horror.

The Lord of Shadows did not just look like a fiend… he was a fiend. The sinister Saint moved with the grace of a dancer and the ruthless precision of a butcher, his sword never resting and never failing to find its target. His white hair fluttered in the wind like ghostly silk.

The attacks of the Awakened warriors either missed him entirely or were deflected by the polished surface of the onyx armor, not leaving even a scratch on it. The Nightmare Creatures — terrifying monsters that had once threatened the lives of the champions of the Song Army — fell to the ground one after another, their bodies severed and horribly mangled by the black sword.

The Lord of Shadows moved in the storm of blood like an omen of death, the gaze of his fierce mask remaining utterly indifferent, utterly cold… utterly devoid of mercy.

But the demon was not without emotion.

What frightened Karna the most… was that he could faintly hear the sinister Saint humming an upbeat tune as he slaughtered Corrupted abominations and bathed in their blood.

The sick bastard... was enjoying the harrowing massacre.

Karna had been wrong.

That thing could not be a human.

It had to not be a human — otherwise, there would be nothing sane left in the world.

At some point, the Lord of Shadows seemed to have grown tired of pretending to be a person and shed his human disguise, turning into a towering devil with four mighty arms and a frightening crown of horns. His already terrifying strength exploded, and he continued his macabre dance of death, tearing a path of carnage and destruction across the caravan.

Nothing could stop him.

One second, he was in one place, gruesomely tearing a powerful Nightmare Creature apart. Next second, he was somehow a hundred meters away, throwing a Master to the ground with a heavy blow of his onyx gauntlet.

And throughout all of this, the darkness continued to flow. The shadows continued to move. The black chains rattled as they

imprisoned their prey, and blood flowed like a river.

Karna was… appalled.

But his indignation did not save him.

In the end, his enchanted bow was cut in half, his sword was shattered, and he was thrown to his knees, the black chains binding his limbs.

The battle was over.

Shaking, Karna looked around.

The darkness was gone. The burning pilgrims had turned to ash. The thralls of Beastmaster were all eviscerated, laying in bloody piles on the ground. The Awakened warriors were all bound by chains, many of them unconscious…

They were utterly defeated.

And the lone creature that had defeated them had not even shed a single drop of blood.

Karna let out a desperate growl.

"Curse you! Curse you, you demon!"

His voice was the only thing breaking the silence, apart from the groans of the wounded soldiers.

No… there was another sound.

The Lord of Shadows was still humming joyfully, as if today was the best day of his life.

The terrifying demon of darkness had assumed his human form once again, observing the battlefield with a strange sense of satisfaction, like a demented artist looking at a painted canvas.

But then…

Something was not right.

Karna looked around once more, trying to understand where the sense of incongruity he felt had come from.

After a while, a slight shudder ran through his body.

The pilgrims had been destroyed, and the thralls had been slaughtered. However, the humans…

Many were wounded, and many were bleeding. However, their wounds were shallow, and their bleeding was light.

And none of them were dead.

They were knocked out, bound by the black chains, and immobilized. But they were alive.

Karna gasped, feeling both relieved and suffocated. He felt bitter.

Because he knew…

That keeping an enemy alive in a battle was much harder than killing them. The Lord of Shadows, that fiend… had not even shown them his true power. His true malevolence, his true ability to sow death was still unknown.

How could that be?

How had Princess Revel survived meeting this horror?

"Why…"

His whisper was quiet, but the dark apparition seemed to have heard him.

The Lord of Shadow turned the chilling gaze of his lightless eyes in Karna's direction. Knowing that there was no sense in trying to avoid attention anymore, Karna gritted his teeth.

"Why did you spare us?!"

The fiend stared at him silently for a while, then chuckled.

His voice was cold and arrogant:

"...Because Changing Star asked me to show mercy today.."

The Lord of Shadow grew quiet for a moment, then let out a regretful sigh.

"It's such a shame. Usually, I love nothing more than slaying humans. How unfortunate... ah, I'm in a terrible mood."

With that, he continued to hum his lively tune and walked away.

Karna heard terrifying sounds coming from somewhere behind, but he could not turn around. It was as if something enormous was feasting, scraping the ancient bones with countless metal feet as it moved.

After some time — an eternity, perhaps — the sounds grew quiet.

Then, the black chains binding him dissolved into a tide of shadows.

He was free.

Standing up, Karna turned and looked around.

All around him, the wounded soldiers were swaying as they rose from the ground.

But the caravan itself was gone. The wagons had disappeared without a trace, most likely utterly destroyed and swallowed by some abominable being.

All that remained were the corpses of the slain Nightmare Creatures, and the blood painting the surface of Godgrave red.

And fear.

Fear of meeting the Lord of Shadows on a day when that dreadful demon was not held back by the mercy of Lady Changing Star.

Chapter-1971: Rumor Mill

Rain was stirred awake by the blaring of a war horn. Opening her eyes to a stark darkness, she sighed and pulled a piece of cloth off her face — the cloth was nothing more than one of her shirts rolled to resemble a blindfold, which she used to block out the light.

Almost every soldier in Godgrave had been forced to seek out darkness in some way or another. The perpetual radiance of the murderous sky was both oppressive and a source of constant fear, but most of all, it was exhausting. It was bright almost everywhere one went, which made sleep elusive. So, they had learned ways to cope with the hateful absence of darkness and night.

Rain's way was on the primitive side, but it still let her sleep in peace. Which was why she was quite unhappy to have been awoken so early.

'What the hell is going on…'

She would have been hurriedly summoning her battle Memories before, but now that the Queen was with them, the camp of the Song Army was much safer. It was highly unlikely that there was immediate danger, so Rain took her time.

Yawning, she stretched, then summoned the Puppeteer's Shroud and climbed out of her tent as soon as the soft grey fabric covered her pale skin. A wave of heat assaulted her outside, and Rain saw that the camp was boiling with strange activity.

The soldiers were rushing, the hideous thralls were being saddled, and the pilgrims were moving silently between the tents. Far in the distance, the main gates of the camp were opening slowly.

Rain studied the commotion somberly.

"Good morning."

Turning around, she saw Tamar standing with her arms crossed a few steps away. Beside her, Ray and Fleur were starting a fire to prepare food.

Rain raised an eyebrow.

"Is it morning?"

The young Legacy shrugged.

"It might as well be. Does it matter?"

Rain failed to suppress another yawn and shook her head.

Walking to the fire pit, she asked:

"What is going on?"

Ray, who had been trying to fire up the kindling with a mundane flint, looked up at her in surprise.

"You haven't heard?"

Rain stared at him for a moment, then took the flint from his hands and ignited the kindling on the first try.

"How would I have heard anything while asleep?"

Everything had been fine yesterday.

A corner of Tamar's mouth curled upward a little. She took a seat near the fire and summoned a spacial storage Memory… which had been the source of endless envy for Rain ever since the Legacy girl received it from the Saint of Sorrow.

Taking out their provisions and a can of powdered coffee — another luxury item — Tamar handed them to Fleur and spoke:

"The news reached the camp a few hours ago — there was another clash with the forces of the Sword Domain. Congratulations. You slept through the second human battle of this war."

Rain froze for a moment, feeling a cold shiver travel down her spine. Her mood was instantly spoiled.

She sighed.

"Oh yeah? Was it on the crossing to the Breastbone Reach?"

That was where the first major battleground of the Realm War would be, and where the Seventh Legion would be marching for in a few days.

Tamar slowly shook her head, her expression turning a bit dark.

"No. It happened near the crossing from the Right Arm to the Collarbone Plain, behind us. A supply caravan was attacked… by the Lord of Shadows."

Now that was concerning news.

Rain threw a sidelong glance at her shadow, wondering how her teacher felt about someone wielding a similar authority launching an attack on the Song Army.

There was a lot of talk about the Lord of Shadows in the camp these days, painting him to be some kind of a monster. Well, it wasn't that uncalled-for — after all, he had crossed blades with Princess Revel and lived to tell the tale.

No one would have been surprised if someone like Changing Star or Morgan of Valor had done the same, but for an entirely unknown Saint to prove himself capable of facing the First Princess in battle was a disturbing revelation. Added to the sinister reputation and mysterious nature of the Lord of Shadows, wild rumors about him were bound to spread.

The situation was not helped by the fact that very few people in the Song camp had ever seen him, like her cohort members had.

Rain suddenly felt tense.

"...How did the Lord of Shadows and his troops manage to reach our rear without being noticed?"

Ray shivered.

"That's the thing. There were no troops… the madman attacked the caravan alone."

The young man seemed stuck somewhere between terror and awe.

"And it wasn't a harassment attack, either. He actually obliterated the entire caravan. Alone."

Rain froze.

She had seen these supply caravans entering the camp. They were not an easy target… far from it, actually. Each was guarded by hundreds of Awakened warriors, several cohorts of Masters, scores of powerful thralls — many of them of the Corrupted Rank — and now escorted by the Queen's pilgrims.

One Saint obliterated them all? How was that possible?

…Were the rumors about the Lord of Shadows not as exaggerated as she had thought?

Both the rumors about his frightening power and the rumors about him being a monster.

Fleur placed a coffee pot on the fire and sighed.

"That is not the strangest part, though."

Rain glanced at her.

"It isn't?"

The delicate girl nodded, her expression strangely similar to one of relief.

"The Lord of Shadow did not just destroy the caravan. For some reason, he spared every human guarding it. He killed the thralls and the pilgrims, but left the soldiers alive."

Tamar's subtle smile widened a little.

"Don't we know the reason? He said it himself. It was because Lady Changing Star had asked him to be merciful."

She seemed strangely cheerful despite the slap dealt to the Song Army.

Rain, meanwhile, was a little dumbfounded.

She could easily believe that Lady Nephis had asked the sellsword Saint to be merciful. She could even believe that the Lord of Shadows would actually listen to her…

But subduing so many warriors? Not killing them, but defeating them without taking a single life?

Just how terrifying did one's power have to be to achieve a feat like that?

She felt both disturbed and relieved. Relieved because her fellow soldiers had been spared, and disturbed because the nebulous figure of the Lord of Shadows seemed even more frightening now.

What would happen on the day the enemy decided not to stay his blade?

Ray cursed quietly.

"I told you all that he was a scary bastard. The first time I saw him… gods. He said… Dreamer Ray, I've decided not to kill you! As if killing me was the default option! If not for Lady Nephis, I would have probably died right there and then."

Fleur looked at him scornfully.

"But he saved our lives, in the end. Show some gratitude."

Ray spared her an apologetic smile.

Tamar sighed, took the cup of fragrant coffee that Fleur offered her, and said:

"In any case, the remnants of the caravan are still on the Right Arm.

They are alive, but many are wounded — so, the army is sending a rescue force to bring them back. We'll know more once they reach the camp."

Then, her expression changed, and she looked around in confusion.

"But… what was that noise?"

Rain scratched the back of her head, receiving her own cup of coffee.

"What noise? I didn't hear anything."

She was lying through her teeth, though.

She did hear it.

'What the hell?!'

Tamar frowned.

"I am sure I heard something. Sounded like… humming?"

Chapter-1972: Private Conversation

Rain took a sip of coffee, hiding her face behind the tin cup.

She had heard it too!

After all, the humming had come from her own shadow.

'What is this fool doing?!'

Feeling pins and needles, she gulped down the scalding coffee and forced out a smile.

"Well, anyway. I'll go take a walk… I mean, visit the baths. Thank you kindly, Fleur, the coffee was delicious."

She had to get away from her companions as quickly as possible, in case her teacher was planning to start whistling or actually break into a song.

Rain was truly flabbergasted. He had always been flawlessly cautious when around other people… what could have made him commit such a ridiculous mistake?

Putting the cup down, she stood up, stretched one more time, and headed away from their small cluster of tents.

"Wait, Rani! Aren't you going to eat breakfast?"

Rain waved a hand and answered Tamar in a carefree tone:

"Later! I'm not very hungry."

'Damnation…'

She needed to find somewhere private to talk to her teacher. Sadly, privacy was not very common in the crowded camp of the Song Army… still, she knew a place or two.

In fact, many soldiers did, since everyone needed privacy from time to time, for one reason or another — some as innocent as simply wanting to be alone, some a bit more salacious.

The place Rain had chosen was situated at the back of a large warehouse where the building materials were stored, not far from the towering Dream Gate. Now that the walls of the camp had been built, and the Queen was here, making damaging them a tall task for the Nightmare Creatures inhabiting Godgrave, very few people visited the warehouse, let alone walked around it.

She knew this place well.

Squeezing into a narrow space between the wall of the warehouse and a neat pile of stone slabs unloaded behind it, she leaned her back against one of them and closed her eyes for a moment.

Then, she looked at her shadow angrily and hissed:

"Hey! What was that?!"

Her shadow remained silent for a bit.

Then, it answered in an absentminded tone:

"Huh? What was what?"

Rain opened her mouth, losing the ability to talk for a second.

"The humming! Why the hell were you humming before?"

A second shadow emerged from her own and scratched the back of its head.

"...Was I humming? Oh... sorry. It must have been because I'm in a really good mood."

'He finally lost what little remained of his mind!'

Rain didn't even know what to say.

Her teacher, meanwhile, assumed a human form, leaning on the wall of the warehouse across from her. He did indeed seem to be in a strangely good mood, with a subtle smile on his lips and a distant look in his eyes.

Rain had not seen him in the flesh for a long time, so being face-to-face once again warmed her heart. Still, she tried to maintain a stern expression.

He couldn't be so careless again!

Her teacher, meanwhile, gave her a long look.

"Right. Since we are already here, I actually wanted to talk to you about something."

Rain raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? Well… good."

He smiled.

"What, did you miss me?"

She raised her chin a little and looked at him with disdain.

"As if!"

…That was a lie. She had, indeed, missed him quite a bit. They had not seen each other in a long while, after all.

Her teacher laughed.

"How heartless. So, you didn't really want to see me…"

He let out a sigh and shook his head sadly.

"And here I was, all excited to show you all the wonderful new Memories I prepared for you..."

Rain eyes glistened. Taking a step forward, she grabbed his arm and

looked at him with an expression of utter devotion.

"Teacher! Your student missed you so much! My heart ached so terribly at being unable to see you that I couldn't sleep at all… so I just counted days and hours, finding solace in the memories of how benevolent and amazing you are…"

He stared at her for a second, then laughed.

"That's better."

Then, he fell silent.

Rain waited for a few moments.

And for a few moments more.

Eventually, she spoke:

"Teacher… so, about those Memories?"

He grinned.

"Sure, I'll give it to you. But… not here. There's something else we need to do, so let's go somewhere more private."

Rain wanted to say that there weren't really any places more secluded than this one in the army camp, and that going outside unnoticed would not be easy…

But at that moment, her teacher fell into the shadows.

And pulled her with him.

A moment later, they were somewhere else, surrounded by darkness and the damp, suffocating smell of the jungle.

Everywhere around them, the vermilion jungle sprawled. Rain's nostrils were assaulted by countless smells, and her ears were assaulted by countless sounds. The rustle of leaves, the hum of abominable insects, the distant footsteps of dreadful predators…

They were in the middle of the jungle, surrounded by darkness. That

could only mean one thing…

Rain's eyes widened, and she suddenly felt cold. Her hair stood on end.

"Teacher! Did… did you bring me to the Hollows?!"

Of course, she had kept her voice to a barely audible whisper.

He just nodded calmly, as if it was not even worthy of being mentioned.

"Yes. But don't worry… there are no Cursed Nightmare Creatures nearby. Only the Great Ones."

Rain shuddered.

'You bastard! What do you mean, "only" the Great Ones?!'

Pulling her along, her teacher walked between the ancient trees and entered a small clearing.

There… somehow… Rain saw a familiar brick cottage.

She was too dazed to even bother wondering what it was doing in the Hollows.

This time, she was led to a back door — Rain was pretty sure that it had not existed the last time she saw the cottage, but now, it was undeniably there.

Inside was a vast chamber filled with darkness. And in the middle of that darkness... lay a towering mountain of items.

There were pieces of broken wagons, piles of precious mystical materials, bags of flour and rice, crates of arrows with arrowheads forged from sorcerous steel, barrels filled with unknown liquids, slabs of building stone… and so much more.

There was a very familiar symbol burned into the wooden crates, as well.

…The crest of the Royal Clan Song.

Rain froze.

Raising a shaking hand, she pointed at the mountain of supplies and asked in a small voice:

"Teacher… w—what is that?"

But she knew what it was. It was the supply caravan of the Song Army... what was left of it.

He glanced at the supplies briefly and shrugged.

"That? The supplies meant for the Song Army, of course."

Rain nodded.

'Right.'

As if that explained anything!

She struggled to speak for a moment.

"But what are they doing here?"

Her teacher sighed.

"Well, I thought that it would be a real shame to just burn them all or toss them into the Sea of Ash. So, I commandeered them instead. Oh, but don't tell anyone… officially, all these supplies were destroyed…"

Feeling like she was losing her mind, Rain took a deep breath, and then whispred loudly:

"But why do you have them?! It was the Lord of Shadows who attacked the caravan! That scary bastard!"

The monster whom even Princess Revel couldn't defeat.

Her teacher stared at Rain with a surprised expression.

Then, he scratched his nose.

"...Wait, you really didn't know?"

What was she supposed to know?!

Rain silently shook her head.

He coughed.

"It's because I am the Lord of Shadows."

Noticing Rain's dumbfounded expression, her teacher smiled pleasantly.

"Just think about it… anyone claiming to be the Lord of Shadow would be claiming to be the lord of me. And even if there was a fool crazy enough to do something like that, I would have probably sent them to see the Shadow Realm real quick… to dissuade them..."

Chapter-1973: Me, Myself, and I

For a while, there was nothing but silence in the dark hall.

Then, there was more silence.

Rain stared at her teacher with wide eyes.

'What did he just say?'

It seemed that she imagined that her teacher claiming to be the Lord of Shadows…

The Lord of Shadows — the mysterious Saint of Godgrave, the sinister sellsword who had offered his blade to the King of Valor, faced Princess Revel in the battle at Vanishing Lake, and decimated a supply caravan of the Song Army alone, sparing the lives of two hundred Awakened and Ascended warriors at Changing Star's behest.

That Lord of Shadows.

'Wait…'

The Lord of Shadows who had saved the lives of Tamar, Ray, and Fleur!

…At Changing Star's behest.

The situation was so shocking that Rain was struggling to form a single cohesive thought, but despite all its seriousness, an entirely frivolous memory surfaced in her mind instead of something important.

It was one of her teacher's preposterous rants:

"...Do you know Princess Nephis? Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan? I was practically her boyfriend!"

Rain almost swayed.

'No… no, wait!'

She pierced her teacher with an intense gaze, momentarily forgetting even about the sweet Memories he had promised to give her.

"Teacher… you… you really are the Lord of Shadows?"

The bastard had started humming again, at some point.

Hearing her, he looked at her and smiled.

"Sure. Now, can we move on to…"

Rain did not let him finish.

"No! We absolutely cannot move on! What the… how… I mean, why… no, what do you mean, you're the Lord of Shadows?! He's all the way in the camp of the Sword Army! When he was fighting Princess Revel, you were with me! When he was saving Tamar, you were helping me track down the Huntsman! How does that make any sense?! What, you can be in two places at the same time? Following me around and simultaneously acting as the Lord of Shadows?"

Her teacher gave her a confused look.

"What? Of course not…"

Rain let out a relieved sigh.

'Thank the gods! It was just another one of his preposterous lies.'

However, she celebrated too early. Because her teacher wasn't done talking.

"...I can be in seven places at the same time. Actually, I am also a Knight Commander of Clan Valor and the Memory Purveyor of the Ivory Island. Oh… and I also run a small restaurant in Bastion. It's quite popular!"

Rain just stared at him with a dumbfounded expression.

Her teacher looked at her with concern and smiled.

"Do you want to sit down?"

She nodded slowly.

"Yeah."

A moment later, specks of darkness swirled in the air and formed into an opulent wooden chair. Her teacher moved it caringly to stand just behind Rain, and she lowered herself onto the seat.

Or rather, she plopped down on it gracelessly.

'Aaa!'

So… her teacher could be in seven places at the same time.

She had to repeat it several times mentally for the meaning of these words to sink in.

Rain covered her face with a palm.

'Let's think about it...'

Something like that was unheard of… but not really impossible. After all, there were all kinds of Aspects in the world, and all kinds of unnatural powers wielded by the Nightmare Creatures. Anything was possible!

Actually, it even made a lot of sense.

She had long noted how similar her teacher and the Lord of Shadows seemed. It was just that she could not have concluded that they were one and the same without this key piece of information. Assuming that a person could exist in several places at the same time would have been quite an unreasonable leap of logic, after all.

Who could have guessed that her closest companion was also a complete stranger… a sinister Saint serving the King of Swords, no less?

And what was that, had he mentioned something about running a restaurant in Bastion?!

'A restaurant?!'

Somehow, that last detail rattled her mind more than the rest of what he had said.

No, that was not important right now.

Rain could reluctantly accept that her teacher possessed the power to live several lives at the same time. But…

She lowered her hand and glared at him.

"Teacher… what the hell!"

He scratched the back of his head.

"Huh? What are you angry about this time?"

Rain's eyes narrowed.

"If you are really the Lord of Shadow, one of the most fearsome champions of the Sword Army… then why the hell did you let me join the Song Army?! Did it not occur to you that being on the different sides of this damned war might pose a bit of a problem for us?!"

He looked at her with a strange expression.

"What do you mean? Of course, it did! Have you forgotten that I tried to dissuade you? But no, you just had to be all moral and righteous… I can't just sit on the sidelines! These are the people I know, and they will be the ones who suffer! I can't step back and do nothing! Those were your words… do you even know how loudly I was cursing on the inside while going on about how you are joining the war?"

Rain's eye twitched.

"Well… when you put it like that…"

Her teacher scoffed.

"But I couldn't very well stomp on your principles, so I kept quiet. Well, it doesn't matter that much, anyway. Who says that you and me being on different sides will become a problem? Me and me are on different sides as well, and I'm not worried."

Hearing that last sentence, Rain felt a strong headache.

As if it made sense!

It was too bizarre.

Not only had her teacher been living several lives at the same time, but one of his incarnations was even a general of the opposing army… the most feared general of them all! The very same sinister Saint who had just attacked the supply caravan of Song.

The incriminating evidence was right here — an entire mountain of stolen… commandeered, as he had called it… supplies.

And he had not even taken them in the name of the Sword Army. He had just hoarded them for himself!

Her eyes trembled.

'My teacher… is a bandit! He's a shameless, flagrant highwayman!'

But then again, that one actually wasn't that surprising. Quite the opposite, really.

She could believe it easily. That sounded exactly like something her teacher would do...

Rain took a deep breath.

'So…'

Her teacher was pretending to be a sellsword Saint who had been hired by the King of Swords. He was also the Knight Commander of the Great Clan Valor. He was also the Memory Purveyor — whatever that meant — of the Ivory Island, which was Changing Star's own

Citadel.

And he was a master chef somewhere in Bastion on top of that!

'Right.'

It was going to take her some time to come to terms with these facts.

'Just as expected from a dark deity.'

No… was he really a dark deity?

Suddenly, Rain came to realize that she knew very little about her teacher, despite spending almost every day of these past four years in his company.

She took a deep breath and looked at him soberly.

After hesitating for a while, Rain asked:

"Teacher… who are you, really?"

Chapter-1974: Lost Time

Rain hesitated, trying to formulate her question better.

"I mean… are you a human? A spirit? Some strange apparition that enjoys cooking, terrifying vast armies of Awakened, and educating young maidens? And don't you dare say that you are just a shadow! What does that even mean?"

Her teacher stared at her for a few moments.

"Well… a shadow is the dark area that appears when an object blocks the source of light…"

Rain clenched her fists.

"That's not what I was asking!"

He laughed, then commanded the shadows to rise from the floor and manifest into another — much less comfortable, from the looks of it — chair.

Sitting down, her teacher shrugged.

"What are you even talking about? I am just a human Saint."

Rain shook her head energetically.

"No! I've met Saints, and there are no human Saints like you. You never sleep, never eat, live in the shadows, and go around slaying Skinwalker vessels as if they were children. You even know how to guide a person to Awakening without infecting them with the Spell. And that is just one-seventh of you!"

He hesitated for a little while.

"Well, alright. I'm not… just… a human Saint. I am quite special, as

far as human Saints go."

Leaning back, he smiled.

"In fact, there is no one else like me. As far as I know, there are two other Transcendent humans who can rival my power. However, I am unique even among them… because I am not a carrier of the Nightmare Spell anymore."

Rain blinked.

'A Saint… who is not a carrier of the Nightmare Spell?'

Anymore?

How was that possible?

Noticing her confused expression, her teacher chuckled.

"It's a long story — a story that spans thousands of years, actually, so forgive me if I don't go into detail. Suffice it to say, I met a very loathsome Cursed Terror in my Third Nightmare... and here I am."

He hesitated, and then added.

"My original body is someplace else. Unlike this incarnation, it does eat, sleep, and perform all the things that humans tend to do. The version of me that has been following you around, meanwhile, is one of my shadows. That is why I sometimes seem a bit weird, compared to normal humans."

Rain studied him silently.

'So that's how it is.'

She felt satisfied, because things were finally starting to make sense.

But, strangely enough… she also felt a little betrayed. Because her teacher had an entire other life — several of them, actually — that she knew nothing about.

Suddenly, something occurred to her.

"Teacher… if you are a human, then what is your name?"

He coughed.

"My name? Huh… well, if you must know, my name is Sunless. But people usually call me Sunny."

Rain stared at him for a few moments.

Then, she leaned back and laughed.

The laughter came on its own, and although she had tried, she failed to contain it.

"Oh… oh, sorry! It's just funny. Because people used to call me Rainy."

Sunny and Rainy… they were quite a pair, weren't they?

'No… I just can't call Teacher that way!'

Rain felt a strange warmth spread in her chest after finally learning his name. But, at the same time, it was very strange, to think about calling her teacher by such a mundane and human name — she could at least imagine calling him Sunless, but "Sunny"...

'Nope. No way!'

Even if he really was a human, he had not deserved to be treated like one!

After everything he had put her through…

Rain spend some time in silence, digesting the earth-shattering revelations that had befallen her out of nowhere.

'He's the damn Lord of Shadows!'

Eventually, another thought suddenly flashed in her mind, and her expression changed.

'We are quite a pair?'

Now that she knew about the many incarnations of her teacher, she could understand why he was ruling a Citadel in Godgrave and serving the King of Swords. She could also understand why he had positioned himself close to Lady Nephis.

She could even understand why he would run a restaurant, somewhat.

In fact, out of all the lives her teacher had mentioned, only one wasn't making any sense.

This one. The life in which he followed a random mundane girl around, taught her how to survive and thrive in the dire world, and guided her on the Path of Ascension.

Why was this tremendously powerful Saint, someone who clearly aimed to exert influence on the flow of history, wasting his time with her?

Rain was no one special. She was hardworking and talented, yes, but so were countless other people.

In fact…

Hadn't their first ever encounter been strange, to begin with?

Because even back then, in the nameless convenience store in NQSC, her teacher had already known her name.

Rain raised her head and looked at him intently.

"Teacher…"

He smiled faintly.

"Yes? Are you ready to take a look at those Memories? I've worked really hard on them, you know!"

Usually, Rain would have been mesmerized by the promise of receiving new Memories, but today, she did not even spare them a second thought.

Instead, she asked:

"Why did you offer to teach me?"

He stared at her silently for a few moments.

Then, her teacher scoffed.

"Haven't I told you? It's because I am your long-lost brother."

Rain sighed.

"And I told you that I would have remembered having a brother."

He studied her for a while without saying a word.

Then, he shrugged nonchalantly.

"Weren't you adopted?"

Rain nodded slowly, not knowing what that had to do with anything.

'Wait…'

Her teacher smiled.

"Well, I was your brother before that. There… you have my permission to drop the 'teacher' and start calling me 'older brother' instead."

Rain froze.

'Before… that?'

She had no memories from before she was adopted. After all, that happened when she was very young — three years old, at best.

Her parents had never made a secret of the fact that she was not their biological child, and had never treated her differently because of that. That was why Rain had never really felt a need to learn where she had come from…

However, she had tried to find out eventually. Her parents helped

her, and her dad even pulled some strings at work.

But there was nothing to learn. There was no robust centralized database that contained the records of every person living in the outskirts — in fact, many of them had no digital trace whatsoever. They weren't citizens, and so, the government did not care to waste manpower on keeping records of them.

All they found out was that Rain's parents were both deceased, her mother passing away last due to illness — even that was only a rumor an orphanage worker heard from the person who had worked there before him.

And that was all.

She had been a little disappointed to have learned nothing, but not too much.

So why… why did Rain feel like she was forgetting something?

It was as if she had just thought about it, but the thought slipped away.

Looking at her teacher, she asked evenly:

"If you are really my brother… then where have you been? Where have you been all this time?"

His smile dimmed a little.

Strangely, Rain found it hard to focus on what he was about to say.

Her teacher lingered for a few moments, then looked away.

"Rotting in the outskirts, at first. And then… well. I can't really tell you, and you should not ask."

Rain looked at him, stunned.

He was not joking. He had not been joking, from the start.

She felt… some strange, inexplicable emotion rising in her heart.

She thought that she had never cared about her original family and about her past. But now, it seemed that she had been wrong.

Or maybe she had simply forgotten.

Looking at the young man sitting in front of her…

The familiar, insufferable, whimsical, caring, strong, funny, unreliable, dependable man who had been her companion, confidant, teacher, and protector for the last four years...

Rain took a shaky breath.

Then, she said tentatively:

"B… brother?"

Chapter-1975: The Incredible Adventures and Astonishing Deeds of Heroic Dreamer Sunless and his Brave Disciple Rain, Abridged (Volume VIII)

Sunny had not planned to confess the truth of their bond to Rain today. He had only wanted to show her the spoils of his raid on the supply caravan, so that she could connect the dots and realize that her teacher and the Lord of Shadows were the same person.

The two armies were going to clash soon, so Sunny had judged that it was time to start slowly revealing the true nature of the war to Rain. She was directly involved in the conflict between the Sovereigns, after all, so he had to give her an opportunity to prepare herself for its resolution.

Because that resolution was not going to be what people on either side expected it to be.

However, Rain reacted in a way that forced Sunny to share more truth than he had wanted to… and although he could have avoided her poignant question despite the strict limitations of his Flaw, after thinking about it for a few fleeting moments, he chose not to.

Perhaps it was because of what had happened between him and Nephis. Sunny had already forsaken reason and given up on holding back, completely, abandoning caution to blindly follow his desires. And since he had already betrayed one inhibition, the rest of them did not seem as sensible and important anymore.

What did he have to lose? He had nothing.

"B… brother?"

Hearing that word from Rain's mouth made Sunny flinch.

It was such an emotional moment. It was something that he had been wanting to hear… hear again… ever since saying goodbye to his little sister in the rundown orphanage, almost two decades ago.

And yet, he had not flinched because of the powerful, almost overwhelming feeling that swelled in his heart because of that word.

Instead, he had flinched out of sheer embarrassment.

It felt so awkward!

Partially because Sunny was almost afraid to choke up, but mostly because he could not help but cringe a little at the same time. Hearing Rain call him "brother" after the last four years was just too... unnatural.

He coughed, struggling with the desire to hide his face.

After a few moments of silence, Sunny said:

"...I take it back. You can continue to call me Teacher."

Rain studied him with a cautious, vulnerable expression.

For a moment, he was worried that his answer had hurt her feelings...

But then, a faint smile twisted her lips.

"Big brother?"

Sunny shuddered.

'Even worse!'

"Stop it."

Rain's smile widened.

"Why… big brother?"

A heavy sigh escaped from Sunny's lips.

'I had not thought this through...'

***

Sunny led Rain out of the Brilliant Emporium. Both of them were silent, not quite sure how to treat each other now that the nature of their relationship was completely rewritten.

Sunny knew what his familial bond to Rain meant to him. She was the only family he had left in the world… for many years, she had been the only person he cared about in the world, as well. And even though there were other people he cared for deeply now, Rain still held a singular place in his heart.

But it was probably different for her.

What did the word "brother" even mean to his sister?

After all, she did not remember having him as a brother. As far as Rain was concerned, someone else was her family — people who had raised her, cared for her, and showered her with affection, never letting her feel alone or abandoned. Who had been with her for as long as she could remember herself. There was a lifetime of precious memories shared between them, unlike between her and Sunny.

Why would she long for something that she had never lacked?

Why would she miss someone she had never known?

So… Rain must have felt a little awkward and unsure of what to say, too.

However, she did speak soon after exiting the Brilliant Emporium.

That was because Sunny had moved the Marvelous Mimic while they were talking inside.

After ambushing the supply caravan, he had fled the battlefield with as much speed as he could muster, not sparing any essence. It was quite a prudent decision, considering that the battle had taken place

within Ki Song's Domain — if he had not left swiftly, the Queen herself could have come to greet him.

As a result, Sunny had managed to return to the Nameless Temple in record time. He had not planned to bring Rain here again, yet, but changed his mind halfway through their conversation. Dismissing the Mimic from the Hollows below the warcamp of the Song Army, he summoned it again as the Lord of Shadows inside his Citadel.

So, Rain was quite surprised to see a vast underground chamber outside the Mimic's door instead of the ancient jungle of the Hollows.

She looked around with interest.

"...This is the Nameless Temple, then? The Citadel of the Lord of Shadows?"

Sunny nodded.

"Yes."

Rain took a deep breath.

"So you do have a Citadel, after all!"

He gave her an amused look.

"Didn't I say that I do?"

She lingered for a moment.

"Well, yeah… but you lie all the time, so I did not really believe it. I mean, you lived in my shadow for four… for four… for four years…"

Rain's voice slowly trailed off, as if she was starting to realize something.

Sunny scoffed.

"I never lie. Didn't I also tell you that I am the most honest person in the world? Two worlds, even."

His sister's eyes widened slowly.

He could guess what she was thinking about.

'The joke about being my brother turned out to be true. The story about ruling an ancient temple turned out to be true. Wait. Wait, wait, wait! If those are true… then what else is true?!'

Rain looked at him with a fearful expression.

A few moments later, she asked in a small voice:

"So… that story about killing an evil version of yourself?"

Sunny nodded.

"Ah, yes. That happened. He was such a hateful, odious, insufferable bastard! Good riddance."

Rain hesitated.

"What about sailing on a river of time that flows inside the corpse of an Unholy Titan?"

He shrugged.

"Sure. That was my Third Nightmare."

Her eyes shook a little.

Rain gulped, then took a deep breath.

"...What about being twenty-six years old, four years old, and several thousands of years old at the same time?"

Sunny glanced at her and smiled nonchalantly.

"River of time, remember? You would not believe the kind of shenanigans I survived there. It's also the reason why I am twenty-six years old despite having been born twenty-five years ago, and am five years older than you despite having been only four years older than you before. Oh, and the part about being four years old — that is the age of this incarnation of mine. I became a Saint during the Chain of Nightmares."

Rain just stared at him silently, dumbstruck.

"As if any of that nonsense makes any sense!"

Sunny smiled brightly.

"I'll give you that. The Tomb of Ariel was a little confusing…"

The young woman opened and closed her mouth several times, as if trying to force herself to ask the next question, but not daring to.

Eventually, she managed to squeeze out:

"What about being a celebrity, a war hero, and immensely rich?"

Sunny grinned.

"I used to be all of those at one point in time or another. Come to think about it, I am back to being all three now!"

Rain took a deep breath, remained silent for a while, and then asked weakly:

"Do you really... know someone who became a Saint as a baby?"

He raised an eyebrow.

'Huh. She remembers that, too?'

It seemed like his nagging had been quite memorable.

"Sure! You've heard of him too, actually… Little Ling, Saint Athena's son. Of course, you weren't there when he was born and did not feed him ice cream every week, unlike me. Oh, and I am also the only reason she met her husband..."

Rain remained silent for longer this time, then suddenly yelled:

"What about the blood of an ancient demon flowing in your veins?! What about devouring the bones of a nebulous deity?! What about ruling a fragment of a divine realm?!"

Sunny scratched the back of his head in embarrassment, then said

humbly:

"...All true."

Rain staggered.

After a while, she asked in a quiet, numb voice:

"Did Beastmaster really ask you to run away with her once?"

He laughed, which prompted Rain to glare at him angrily.

'I should probably tone it down...'

"Well… yeah. Technically, she offered to run away from a Great Nightmare Creature together — but there were other candidates, and she chose me. I guess she likes me... a little."

His sister closed her eyes and fell silent.

Eventually, though, she asked in a shaking voice:

"...Is Lady Nephis really your girlfriend?"

Sunny tripped.

He did not answer for a while, then coughed and said in a neutral tone:

"Don't start calling her Sister-in-Law just yet… but yeah, it's true."

He paused for a moment, and then added with a dreamy smile:

"In fact, I'm in her bedroom right now…"

In the next moment, Sunny was surprised to find a fist flying toward his face.

Chapter-1976: Rani of Shadow

Sunny failed to dodge Rain's punch.

…So, she hurt her hand.

They ascended the stairs silently, but the silence was much less awkward than it had been a few minutes ago. In fact, it was quite comfortable, almost like before… well, if not for the fact that Rain groaned from time to time, cradling her bruised hand.

"What the hell are you made of, stone?"

Sunny looked at her and smiled.

"Actually... yeah, sort of. You see, there was this suit of armor I had, a Memory of something forged by the ruler of the Underworld…"

Rain shook her head decisively.

"No, no, stop. I don't want to know!"

He chuckled.

There were some Valor troops stationed at the Nameless Temple, but their camp was outside its walls. Still, they had access to the main hall and the Gateway located there, so Sunny took a roundabout way to the inner sanctum — and the courtyard beyond.

There, a tall tree stood in absolute darkness, its leaves rustling quietly in the wind.

Sunny led Rain across the black marble plates. As he did, the darkness around them stirred and surged, eventually manifesting into a long bench — sitting down, Sunny leaned back and inhaled deeply.

Rain sat down, too, looking around with curiosity. Her gaze grew a

little tense at the sight of the tree, and she studied it cautiously.

Her caution was easy to understand — here in Godgrave, the only trees were those spawned by the abominable jungle. She had seen too many of her comrades being killed and consumed by them, enough so that the sound of rustling leaves had already become an instinctual fear.

Sunny sighed.

"Calm down. I brought it here from the waking world… it is a perfectly mundane tree."

He paused for a moment, and then added:

"Well, at least it should be."

In truth, he wasn't quite sure. After being tended to by Shakti the Fire Keeper, this tree of his had recovered from its former malaise. It was doing quite well now, already having grown a bit taller… too well, even, considering the environment. It was only ever surrounded by shadows, after all.

Sunny honestly had no idea what was happening to his tree.

Hearing his words, Rain seemed to calm down. She looked around once more, and then asked suddenly:

"Wait. If you really are a Saint who rules a Citadel… and my brother… then…"

Her expression became a little strange.

"...Doesn't that make me an actual Legacy? I'm a Legacy?"

Sunny stared at her silently for a few moments.

That was an interesting question, actually.

He was one of the six most powerful humans in the world, did indeed conquer a Citadel with his own two hands, and had even unlocked his Aspect Legacy. More than that, Rain was a direct beneficiary of

that Legacy now that she bore the Mark of Shadows.

There was no codified definition of what a Legacy clan was, really. Most of them had been founded by the prominent Awakened of the First Generation — those powerful and lucky enough to survive and thrive in the dire world of the Nightmare Spell. Ruling a Citadel and having a Legacy heirloom were common traits shared by many clans, but not all of them.

In fact, the hierarchy of the Awakened nobility had been shaken in recent years. With so many new Masters and Saints making a name for themselves in the wake of the Chain of Nightmares, some old families had suddenly found themselves inferior to the nameless newcomers.

Old clans fell out of power, and new ones were being established. Take the Han Li clan, for example, who had lost its most promising scion and never managed to produce a Saint — although not entirely forgotten, it had definitely declined, losing all influence.

It was funny to think that Sunny had once been afraid of their retaliation.

He scoffed.

"Girl… if you don't qualify to be a Legacy, then no one in the world can claim that they do."

Rain blinked a couple of times, then suddenly smiled.

"Well, well, well… who would have thought? Turns out I'm just as much of a princess as Tamar is. Ha! That is an entirely new perspective… how should I break the news to her, I wonder!"

She remained silent for a few moments.

"Wait, so what do I call myself? Rain of the Shadow Clan? Rain of Shadow? I mean… Rani of Shadow? That does sound kind of cool…"

Sunny did not answer immediately, since he was stumped himself.

What about him? Was he supposed to call himself Sunny of Shadow?

Sunless of Shadow? No, that did not sound even remotely right.

But then again, Neph's grandfather had not called himself Immortal Flame of the Immortal Flame...

He was simply Immortal Flame.

So, Sunny did not have to call himself anything.

"You can call yourself whatever you want. However, do remember that if anyone learns of our relationship, the royal clan will probably capture and execute you as a spy. The Lord of Shadows is a champion of the Sword Domain, after all."

Rain smiled dimmed a little.

"Right. I guess I'll continue playing the peasant and let Tamar be the princess... for a while longer. But then!"

She laughed.

"I'll force her to call me Young Lady Rani for a week straight!"

After that, Rain gave Sunny a curious look, hesitated for a few moments, and said in a tone that was a little more subdued:

"If it was you who fought Princess Revel at Vanishing Lake, then you must have crossed swords with Tamar's dad, as well."

Her words hung in the silence, making the courtyard of the Nameless Temple feel a bit grim.

Sunny knew what Rain had left unsaid. It was that he could have become the murderer of her friend's father… and that fighting on the different sides of a bloody war was not as inconsequential as Sunny tried to make it look.

He shrugged.

"That Citadel was quite large. I only saw him from the distance, actually."

Then, he looked at her and added:

"It is not your place or responsibility to think about these matters, Rain. You are merely an Awakened… in the grand scheme of the war, your beliefs and actions are insignificant. Not that they don't have value. In any case, you don't have to feel burdened by what is happening to the world. All you can do is follow your principles and do your best."

Sunny turned to the tree, remained silent, and then added, a hint of coldness finding its way into his voice:

"People like me will deal with the rest."

Rain studied him for a while, then asked neutrally:

"Because your beliefs and actions are significant, unlike mine?"

Sunny smiled darkly and shook his head.

"The only difference between you and me… is that I am strong enough to force my beliefs onto others, and reshape the world with my actions. Strength is the only virtue that matters, in the end. And weakness is the only sin."

She let out a quiet sigh and looked at the tree, as well, listening to the peaceful rustle of its leaves.

After a while, Rain asked:

"Why did you bring a tree from the waking world here, anyway?"

Sunny lingered for a moment, and then smiled.

"Because it is my grave."

Chapter-1977: Their Legacy

Rain lingered for a moment, then said in a neutral tone:

"That's… a bit ominous."

Sunny chuckled and looked at the tree with a distant expression. Eventually, he glanced at her with a faint smile.

"I wanted you to see this tree, actually."

He paused for a heartbeat or two, then looked away.

"People in the outskirts rarely get to have graves. The place is terribly overcrowded — well, at least it used to be before the Dream Gates — and the mortality rate is extremely high. Bodies get disposed of in a very utilitarian way, so there's nothing left behind."

Sunny sighed.

"Very few people from the outskirts survive the First Nightmare, as well. So, I was quite convinced that I would die when the Spell chose me. I didn't mind that much, really, but it was a bit sad to think that there would be no trace of me left in the world…"

He paused for a moment and smiled wryly, realizing how ironic it was. After all, that was exactly what had happened to him, in the end — every trace of his life had been erased from existence, leaving nothing behind. He had assured this obliteration willingly, earnestly, and with his own hands.

Oblivious to his thoughts, Rain listened to him intently.

Sunny looked at her, then pointed to the lonely tree.

"That was why I carved a line into this tree before entering the Nightmare. You know… to leave my mark on the world."

She traced his finger and studied the dark bark, then frowned slightly.

"But there are three lines."

Sunny nodded.

"Yes. That is because I had carved two lines into the tree before that."

He paused for a few moments.

"For our parents."

Rain grew quiet, looking at the three lines with a guarded expression.

Sunny smiled wistfully.

What could he say?

After a while, he finally spoke:

"They were good people, the two of them. Actually, they were very mundane people, but that is already an accomplishment in the outskirts. Our father… I don't really remember him that well. In my memory, he is more of a feeling than a person — something big, quiet, strong, and caring. Mom used to say that he had a mischievous side and quite a hot temper hiding behind the calm facade, but I don't know. He worked on one of the city barrier maintenance crews, and died in an accident not long after you were born. Stuff like that happens all the time to maintenance workers."

Sunny did not know a lot about his father, but he did know some things. The mere fact that his dad had been a maintenance worker instead of ending up in one of the local gangs spoke a lot about his character. The way he had cared about his family was quite telling, too.

He had been a good person, and both Sunny and Rain inherited some of that goodness... it seemed.

It suddenly occurred to Sunny that Rain's mild obsession with building and infrastructure, which she had picked up while working

as a laborer on the road crew, might have come from their dad.

He smiled.

"Our mom… now that I think about it, when you were born, she was about as old as you are now. She was very cheerful, soft… and pretty. Well, at least from what I remember. Actually, you look a lot like her. When I saw you for the first time, I thought — thank the gods, unlike me, Rain took after mom!"

Sunny chuckled.

Rain indeed resembled their mom very much. Of course, her beauty was far more striking… after all, she was an Awakened. Perhaps more importantly than that, she had grown up in an affluent district of NQSC, breathing clean air and eating well.

Their mother, however, had spent all her life in the outskirts, where the air was toxic and the best food one could get was synthpaste. She had been affected by this harsh and unforgiving environment, inside and out.

…Still, in Sunny's memory, she was breathtaking.

His smile widened a little as he looked at Rain, studying her features subtly.

"She loved us very much. Mom worked in a factory that produced air filtration systems, and spent all her free time taking care of you and me. We lived in a small cell in one of the hives, on one of the highest floors. In the winter, she often cuddled with us on the floor, sharing her warmth and reading to us."

Sunny searched his memory for more details, not knowing what else to say.

"Oh, yes… she liked reading. We had an old communicator with a cracked screen, and she downloaded all kinds of stuff from the network to read. She especially liked fanciful stories about the world before the Dark Times. What else? Her favorite snack was fried synthpaste crumbs, with whichever spices she could get. She called me Sunless because I was born during an eclipse, and called you Rain

because you were born during a storm."

Rain's eyes widened slightly.

He paused, remained silent for a few moments, and then sighed.

"...She got sick when you were about three, and eventually passed away. I… hope you never believed that you had been abandoned. Because she would have never left you… or me… by choice. It's just that life is hard in the outskirts."

Sunny hesitated for a while, looking at the gently rustling tree.

Eventually, a pale smile twisted his lips.

"I know that it probably doesn't mean as much to you as it does to me. After all, you already have parents, and they are quite wonderful parents at that. I don't want or expect you to feel any particular way about what I told you, either. It's just that… being forgotten is quite a sad thing. No one remembers mom and dad in this world, except me… but now, you can remember them too. It makes me happy to know that."

Rain remained silent for a few moments.

Then, she said quietly:

"I will. I'll keep them well in my memory."

Sunny smiled.

With that, he stretched his arms above his head and let out a long sigh.

"Well, good. Now, speaking of Memories… we were sidetracked for quite a long time, weren't we? Young Lady Tamar is probably wondering what the hell you are doing in the baths for so long. So, let's get to the important stuff, shall we?"

Rain studied his face with a sober expression for a while, then smiled tentatively.

"Sure. After all, as a Legacy, I should receive some cool stuff, shouldn't I? I swear, there has never been a poorer Legacy than me… and a stingier founder of a Legacy Clan than you. Big brother…"

Chapter-1978: Shiny New Heirlooms

After speaking to Rain about their parents, Sunny felt strangely at peace. The darkness surrounding the Nameless Temple was safe and nurturing, and the quiet rustle of the leaves was pleasantly soothing. Added to his previous euphoria, it seemed like nothing could spoil his tranquil mood.

But, at the same time, he didn't feel quite well about himself. After all, he had unexpectedly dumped the knowledge that they were family on Rain, and then proceeded to give her a lecture about their dead parents… whom she did not even remember.

Rain was a young woman who was trying to find her place in the world while dealing with the appalling nature of war — the former was already difficult enough, but the latter was a mental burden that no human could carry well, let alone endure unscathed.

Sunny knew it better than most

And yet here he was, adding to her burden.

Feeling a bit guilty, he decided to sweeten the deal with some gifts.

Luckily, there were the Memories he had prepared for her.

Although Rain seemed a little distant and subdued, her eyes glistened at the mention of Memories. She had witnessed and survived so many horrors since the start of the war, after all, and unlike other Awakened soldiers, she had not received any rewards from the Spell in the process.

The same Awakened soldiers were walking around with their shiny new Memories on full display, and she saw them every minute of

every day.

Naturally, Rain was excited.

And Sunny's mood improved even further after witnessing her excitement.

"Alright… here we go. Don't thank me too enthusiastically!"

With that, he summoned the [Bag of Withholding] and presented it to her proudly.

However, her reaction was not what he had expected.

Instead of bursting with delight and admiration, Rain's just continued to look at him expectantly.

Her expression did not change at all.

She remained silent for a few moments, looking at him with lively anticipation, then blinked a few times and glanced behind him.

Sunny tilted his head a little.

"What's wrong?"

Rain smiled cautiously.

"...That's not it, is it?"

'What a strange question…'

Still holding the Bag of Withholding in one hand, he scratched the back of his head with the other.

"I mean… yes? That's it."

Her smile froze a little.

Slowly, the excited gleam of Rain's eyes was replaced with something that strangely resembled fury.

A seething kind of fury.

Leaning forward, she shouted suddenly:

"What do you mean, that's it?! One Memory? One?! After everything I went through, and all the abominations I killed? Am… am I a joke to you?! What kind of a damned Legacy lord are you, huh? Big brother!"

Sunny stared at her in shock.

Then, he stared some more.

After that, he let out a quiet sigh and said with reproach:

"Open it, you idiot."

Rain frowned, then grabbed the leather backpack from his hand — without spending even a second to appreciate the delicate stitching and tasteful decorative details, at that! — and opened the clasp roughly.

A moment later, she forgot to breathe.

Sunny scoffed.

"Such an ingrate…"

Rain raised her head, looking at him with burning eyes.

Her expression was strangely intense.

"Is that… a spatial storage Memory?"

And her voice was strangely hoarse.

Sunny nodded dismissively.

"Yeah. Just a little something I crafted for practice… it's called the Bag of Withholding, by the way. I put everything else inside."

In the next moment, he was suddenly deafened by a high-pitched squeal, and then frightened by a low, completely unladylike boast of laughter.

"Big brother is the best…"

Sunny's eyes twitched.

"I told you to stop calling me that."

Rain continued to stare at the Bag of Withholding.

"Whatever…"

She studied the leather backpack with bright eyes, then nodded in satisfaction and finally looked up.

"We can work on your naming sense later. Let's see what's inside!"

Sunny frowned in confusion.

'What? What is wrong with my naming sense?'

…But that was an exercise in self-delusion. In fact, he knew perfectly well what was wrong with it.

'Alright, alright. She's not wrong. But... at least I named the other Memories exceptionally well…'

Rain carefully took the Memories in question out of the Bag of Withholding.

Soon, they were all laid neatly on the bench between them.

Sunny pointed to a green flask housed in a black leather sleeve.

"This is the [Green Canteen]. It can store a great amount of water, as well as purify it. Just like the last time, you need to infuse a bit of your essence to claim it as your Memory."

Rain did just that and smiled in satisfaction.

"This is great. Not only can I drink as much as I want, but I can also use it if my water ration in the baths runs out!"

Sunny nodded.

"Yeah. Just don't forget to refill it from time to time. It is quite voluminous, but not boundless."

With that, he pointed to three arrows.

"These are [Heavy Burden], [Outskirts at Noon], and [Don't Cut Yourself]..."

Rain gave him a strange look.

"Really? Those are the names you went with?"

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"Yes. If you don't like them, I can just take them back…"

Rain quickly swept up the arrows and pressed them against her chest.

"No, no! I like them a lot! I can't believe you managed to create something so ingenious, deadly, and aptly named! Uh… what do they do, exactly?"

Sunny gave her an unamused look, then a detailed explanation. As he talked, Rain's expression slowly grew more serious.

Eventually, she nodded.

"I see. Quite powerful, indeed… but I will have to use them tactically. Otherwise, they'll just drain my essence without accomplishing anything."

Sunny held the same opinion.

"It should become a bit easier as you absorb more soul shards, but yes. The potency of Memories I can craft for you is limited by the quantity and quality of your essence. The more powerful a Memory is, the steeper the price of using it will be."

Some of the more powerful Memories could even kill their wielder if used carelessly. Others came with their own kind of Flaws to balance their dire power… like the Sin of Solace, for example.

That cursed thing...

Moving on from the three arrows, Sunny briefly explained what

[Safety First] and the [Pièce de Résistance] did. Rain was especially impressed by the latter…

But not for the right reason.

"A cooling effect?! Ah! It's the best!"

Sunny stared at her for a few moments and shook his head in dejection.

'Does she not realize how revolutionary its other enchantments are… tsk! Too young, too naive…'

He made sure that Rain claimed and summoned both Memories before moving on to the last one. An additional layer of protection was added to the Puppeteer's Shroud, making the armor look much more suitable for intense melee.

Sunny appreciated the subtle, but tasteful blend of grey fabric and black leather, giving himself a mental pat on the shoulder. He had been sure of the defensive properties of this Memory, but worried a little about its aesthetic value. After all, it wasn't easy to design it in a way that complemented the look of the Puppeteer's Shroud perfectly.

But he had done well. His sister looked positively… cool, sharp, and darkly formidable in this enchanted armor.

Finally, he pointed to the sash made from glistening black silk.

"And this… is the [In Case of Emergency]. The most important Memory you'll possess during this war."

Rain frowned, then picked up the silk sash and tied it around her waist.

It went well with the Puppeteer's Shroud, as well, making Sunny regret not having this version of the enchanted armor on the Forgotten Shore.

A moment later, he shuddered in fright.

'Oh, no! Have I been infected by Kai?!'

Throwing the terrifying thought out of his head, he looked at Rain.

"Activate the enchantment."

She did as he told… and suddenly froze.

Not just figuratively, but quite literally.

Even a few strands of her beautiful raven-black hair that the wind had been playing with hung motionlessly in the air, as if frozen in time.

Of course, they were merely frozen in space.

The only sign that Rain was still alive was that her chest was still rising and falling subtly.

Sunny nodded in satisfaction.

"Deactivate the enchantment."

Rain's hair fell, and she took a deep breath while throwing a complicated look at the silk sash.

He sighed.

"That is in case a Cloudbreak catches you unaware. Never take this Memory off while you're in Godgrave… do you understand?"

Rain threw a tense look at him, then nodded slowly.

Sunny smiled.

"Good. Well, then…"

Time was waiting for no one. There was one more thing he needed to talk to Rain about — quite an important thing, too — but it was going to have to wait.

"You've been gone from the camp for too long. I better bring you back…"

Rain smiled.

"Sure. Let's go."

She looked at him with mischief in her eyes, and added:

"Big..."

Before she could finish the sentence, Sunny dismissed the shadows forming the bench they were sitting on, and watched as Rain fell to the marble floor with a startled yelp.

Chapter-1979: Sweet Dreams

Someplace else, Sunny slowly opened his eyes.

Pure sunshine was pouring through the tall arched windows, and the air was suffused with warmth. The sweltering heat of Godgrave was dispelled by a pleasant breeze.

The storm was long over, and the world was at peace.

His body felt refreshed and revitalized despite having been enveloped by a blissful fatigue not too long ago, and his mind was at ease. He had slept well… better than he had ever slept in his life.

Waking up in Neph's bed for the second time in a row felt quite amazing.

Of course, this time, he had not just fallen asleep atop the covers.

Feeling a tantalizing, warm softness pressing against his chest, Sunny raised his head and rested it on a hand, looking down.

Nephis was sleeping peacefully by his side, in his embrace. Her long, beautiful silver hair was scattered across the pillow, glistening in the sunlight. Her face was smooth and enchanting, more vulnerable than it had ever seemed before. Below it, her slender neck led to a round, alabaster shoulder… and beyond that, the alluring sight of her delicate clavicle was revealed, making his heart race.

To Sunny's dismay, the rest was covered by a pristine white sheet.

Still, there was probably no sight more lovely in the entire world.

He remained motionless for a while, delighting in the breathtaking scene and listening to the subtle sound of Neph's tranquil breathing.

His mind was a little empty.

This moment, this feeling, this… closeness. He had been wanting it so desperately, and for long.

Being here, with her, was almost too meaningful to fathom.

And he did not really want to fathom it, either — or anything, for that matter. He was in too good of a mood to spoil it with excessive thinking, and wished to simply enjoy the blissful beauty of the moment.

He wished that it would never end.

How fitting it was, for him to attain what he wanted so deeply in the tower of the Demon of Desire...

With a quiet sigh, Sunny lowered his head back to the pillow and closed his eyes, enveloped in Neph's smell and basking in the sensation of her warmth.

Perhaps… it was alright to sleep for a bit more.

He had almost drifted back into the gentle embrace of sleep when a tentative voice suddenly resounded in his mind:

[Uh… Sunny?]

Sunny opened one eye, startled a little and dissatisfied by the sudden interruption.

[What?]

Cassie remained silent for a few moments, then asked in calm tone:

[Are you guys coming down any time soon? Because, you know… you've been locked up there for a couple of days, already. And Nephis is technically in charge of this entire camp. There are some decisions I can't make alone.]

Cassie spoke in a composed, nonchalant tone… but that only made Sunny feel more embarrassed about what she had said.

For a split second.

Then, a satisfied smile crept up on his face.

'Why yes, we have...'

Sunny answered without opening his eyes, still lost in the softness, warmth, and sunlight.

[Sorry. Nephis is… a bit tired. We should probably let her rest for a while longer, but I'll be there shortly and lend a hand.]

With that, he decisively relaxed his mind, intending to sleep.

At the same moment, his shadow glided across the floor and slid out of the chamber.

Assuming a human form on the stairs, Sunny stretched his arms above his head, sighed sweetly, and walked down with a spring in his step.

Cassie was not too far away, buried under a pile of reports in her office. Walking in, Sunny picked one of them up and briefly studied the contents.

'Huh.'

On a usual day, his mood would have been dampened, but today, Sunny simply put the report down.

"So soon?"

Cassie nodded.

"The royal legions of the Song Army are already on the move. The Seventh Legion will be departing for the battlefield in a few hours, most likely."

She hesitated for a few moments, and then added:

"This time, Seishan and Beastmaster will be joining the fray, as well. Revel has not been seen on the surface since the battle for the Vanishing Lake, though… it is highly likely that she is leading an expedition to the Spine Ocean, already."

Sunny looked away, the darkness in his eyes growing a little bit deeper, and a little bit colder.

"What about the Sovereigns themselves?"

Cassie shook her head.

"It seems that they are not going to take direct action against each other until both of the remaining Citadels are conquered. For now, they will be serving as a deterrent for each other… although I am not sure if Ki Song can even be contained. Her power is an insidious one, after all."

Sunny nodded slowly.

"So… it is an all-out war."

Cassie leaned back in her seat and sighed.

"...Yes. We have received orders to set out west a few hours ago. Nephis, the Fire Keepers, me, Saint Tyris, and the warriors of the White Feather clan — we'll be traveling to the battlefront on the Chain Breaker."

He frowned.

Traveling aboard a flying ship was suicide in Godgrave. The only reason why such an order could have been given… was probably because of Sky Tide, who would be traveling with them.

Which also meant that she would be in the very thick of the bloodshed. Considering how important the role of Saint Tyris was, the champions of Clan Song would stop at nothing to eliminate her.

Pairing her with Nephis was probably as much for her own protection as it was for the safety of the Chain Breaker.

…And Sunny had to safeguard both Sky Tide and Nephis well.

He glanced at Cassie.

"What about the Lord of Shadows?"

She shrugged.

"I suspect that he will be summoned to participate in the first few major battles, at least. Beyond that, we will have to see what the King is planning."

Sunny smiled darkly.

He remained silent for a few moments, and then said with cold indifference:

"Let's give them war, then."

Hearing his words, Cassie nodded slowly.

"If that is the case, there are a lot of preparations that have to be done. Everyone is busy, so… I would appreciate some help."

She gestured to the pile of papers laying on her desk. Some were written in Braille, but some were not.

Cassie needed someone's eyes to read them.

Sunny silently walked to stand behind her shoulder and looked down.

He hesitated for a few moments, and then couldn't help but ask:

"Don't you have any questions, by the way? About, you know…"

"I don't!"

Cassie's swift response came before he could even finish the question.

Her voice was a little bit too loud, as well.

…Sunny could swear that the indomitable blind seer even blushed a little.

Where was her composure? Where was her nonchalance?

He grinned.

"Well, good. Don't be like Effie…"

Cassie took a deep breath.

"As if!"

He chuckled, then hesitated a little, and asked in a calm tone:

"How are things in Bastion?"

Cassie remained silent and motionless for a moment.

When she spoke, though, Sunny couldn't help but flinch.

"...Bastion is gone."

Finally, a deep frown found its way onto his face.

"Gone? What do you mean? Has Mordret taken it already?"

Cassie sighed, then shook her head.

"No… I mean it is literally gone. The castle, the city, and the people."

Her voice grew somber:

"All that is left are the broken walls, the lake, and the shattered moon."

Chapter-1980: Flawed Creation

Morgan opened her eyes in the darkness. She had fallen asleep while sitting on the cold stone floor, her back leaning against a slab of crumbling stone. The wind was howling as it passed through the ruins of the main keep, and pale moonlight poured through the gaping holes of its partially collapsed dome.

Taking a deep breath, she leaned on her sword and stood up.

Her vermilion cloak had turned to tatters, and her black armor was broken and battered. Dismissing both Memories to give them some time to mend themselves, Morgan felt a cold wind caress her skin gently. It was a pleasant feeling, especially after days spent in frenetic fighting.

Her black tunic fluttered slightly, revealing how littered it was with tears, most of them crusted by blood.

She sighed and listened to the sounds of the ruined castle, trying to evaluate if there were any immediate threats.

It did not seem that way. Her companions would have warned her if the enemy was launching another attack… or if something else was. They would not have been eliminated without a fight, either, and there was no chance that she would have missed such a disturbance.

It seemed that Mordret was still licking his wounds after the last assault, just like they were.

'Good...'

Morgan walked into the moonlight and looked up at the tall dais towering above the ruined hall.

There was no throne on the dais, and no altar. Instead, there was

only an iron anvil.

Beautiful swords were scattered on the floor below the dais, glistening in the cold moonlight. There had been a mountain of them here once, but her father had taken most of the swords with him to Godgrave, to use in the battle against the Raven Queen.

Morgan stared at the abandoned swords for a while, a strange mixture of regret and amusement shining in her striking scarlet eyes.

It used to be that she admired the swords her father had forged quite a lot, never missing the chance to steal a look at them. But now, she saw them for what they were — flawed creations that had been discarded by their demanding creator for failing to live up to his harsh expectations.

Morgan knew because she was one such creation herself.

…Thank the gods.

People seemed to be disturbed by the notion, but she had always known that her father saw her as a blade to be forged into a flawless weapon more than he saw her as a human being. That was how he saw everyone, really, and the only distinction between her and the rest of them was that she had been the most promising of blades.

One made of most precious steel, one that he had harbored the most hopes for, and had forged with most care.

Morgan knew that people had always misunderstood her father. To them, he was many things: a great warrior, a genius sorcerer, a wise ruler… a fearsome tyrant.

But what he really was, first and foremost, was an artist. An artist who resented the deep imperfection of the world and rebelled against it, striving to create one flawless thing with all his heart.

A flawless sword.

Morgan had been meant to become that sword, so she understood him best, and she had been fine — happy, even — to carry that responsibility, despite how cold and harsh its weight was. She had

been proud.

It had all changed after Antarctica, of course.

Looking at the scattered swords, Morgan sighed.

There, she had learned the error of her ways. Ever since being a child, Morgan had always done what she was told. She had followed the guidance of her father, enduring his harsh training by sacrificing most of what other children had, and what most other people cherished. She had always excelled, never failed, and satisfied his every demand.

And she still lost.

Which inevitably made her think about the reason for her defeat, of course.

What Morgan realized as a result… was quite disturbing.

If she had done everything her teachers told her to do flawlessly and without complaint, and still lost, then the fault did not lay with her.

Instead, the fault lay with her teachers, and the very form they were trying to mold her to…

In truth, it was not just the King of Swords who had become disappointed in his daughter after Antarctica.

Morgan had become disappointed in her father, too.

'Good thing I did.'

Looking at a beautiful, discarded sword that lay at her feet, Morgan smiled wistfully.

She would have probably become an actual sword if she had continued to follow her father's will blindly. That would be quite a fitting Transcendent Transformation for a girl who had been raised to be a perfect tool… a pretty, deadly blade to be wielded by someone else.

However, Morgan did not really want to be a sword, nor did she want to be wielded by another's hand.

That seemed like quite a pathetic fate to her.

So, her Transcendent Transformation had turned out to be something else.

Of course, she could still transform into a sword — if she wished to.

But that was not at all the only thing she could become.

Picking up the abandoned sword, Morgan silently absorbed it into her body and smiled.

'...How nice. I should have done this much sooner.'

A moment later, her figure rippled, turning into a river of liquid metal. It flowed across the moonlit hall, drowning it. The violence of its passage put cracks into the marble floor and made slabs of stone crumble to dust.

Sweeping every abandoned blade that lay forlorn below the dais, Morgan climbed the steps and swallowed the ancient anvil, as well.

Finally, the river of liquid metal coalesced back into a human figure. A moment later, it regained color, and Morgan was back to her original self.

Looking up, she observed the radiant remains of her shattered moon and sighed.

"Time to face another day."

Chapter-1981: Disillusionment

There was no way to defend Bastion from the Prince of Nothing — not the city on the shores of the Mirror Lake, certainly, and most likely not even the castle itself. As a strategist, Morgan was quite adept at evaluating both the strength of the enemy and that of her own — therefore, she knew that her side was lacking. Achieving victory did not seem like a realistic outcome.

It was very likely that she had not been sent here to achieve victory, to begin with. Buying her father enough time to defeat Ki Song seemed far more likely of a purpose.

So, Morgan had done two things after returning to Bastion from Rivergate.

First, she had claimed the Citadel for herself to gain control over it.

Second, she went to a vast underground chamber hidden deep below the castle, in the heart of a stone maze very few people knew existed, and even fewer still were allowed to enter.

There, a great mirror stood, towering above the floor at dozens of meters in height.

Its frame was composed of two immense stone pillars, and it was covered entirely by black cloth, reflecting nothing.

Morgan hesitated for a few moments, then took a deep breath and pulled the cloth down.

It flowed to the floor like a black waterfall, revealing the dark edifice of the ancient mirror.

The vast underground chamber was drowning in darkness, so one would have expected to see nothing reflecting in the great mirror.

However, instead, pale moonlight poured out of it, illuminating Morgan's pale face.

Inside the mirror, a devastated version of Bastion seemed to be drifting in the beautiful night sky. Countless stars shone on the surface of the still water, made pale and bleak by the radiant shards of the broken moon. Dreadful beings hid in the cold lake, and there was no city on the distant shore. Instead, an ancient forest stood where the city should have been, teeming with harrowing beasts.

That was the true face of Bastion.

And, unlike the illusory one humans of the waking world had inhabited, it was a place that Morgan could defend.

So, taking another breath, she closed her eyes, concentrated on her connection to the Great Citadel...

And made reality and illusion switch places.

Soon, a sunlit city that sprawled on the shore of a beautiful lake was reflecting in the dark mirror, instead, seen from the walls of an immense and magnificent castle. She sighed, gritted her teeth tightly, and used her authority over the Citadel to break free of the illusion.

A moment later, Morgan disappeared from the underground chamber and found herself standing in a ruined hall with a tall dais and crumbled dome. There was no sunlight here, but the eerie scene was bathed in moonlight.

The world was in the embrace of a foreboding night.

The castle was a ruin, and the still lake was surrounded by a pristine wild forest.

This was what lay in the heart of the Sword Domain now. The Bastion that people knew was safely hidden in the dark mirror, and the true face of this land was revealed to the Dream Realm once more.

The citizens of Bastion were safe… but the same could not be said about the rest of the Sword Domain. The human cities depended on

each other, after all, and they especially depended on the capital — the place where the Dream Gate had stood before being summoned to Godgrave instead.

There were merchant caravans, exploration parties, patrolling warriors, and the like traveling to or from Bastion. Now, they had nowhere to go or return to. Worse than that, there was now a dire and perilous region of untamed wilderness in the heart of the Sword Domain, one far more dangerous than any of the surrounding lands.

The closest human Citadel to Bastion, Rivergate, had already fallen — but the rest of them would have to mobilize all their forces to avoid disaster.

Luckily, there was Nightingale.

Morgan had sent word to the people who ruled the Citadels in the absence of the Transcendent champions in advance, and she had also sent Saint Kai to scour the surrounding land and warn the travelers of danger. With his ability to fly, inhuman sight, and stunning speed, most tragedies could be avoided… hopefully.

Of course, she had no doubt that her dear brother would anticipate that decision and set up an ambush for the charming Saint. But Nightingale was quite a fearsome being… Morgan had faith that he would complete his mission alive, especially after being warned about the danger.

But even if there was no way to warn the rest of the Sword Domain about unleashing true Bastion from the mirror, it still had to be done.

Morgan had several reasons to summon it back to reality.

First and foremost, of course, was protecting the populous city… or rather, preventing her brother from using it as a hostage. Now that the city was replaced by the dark expanse of an abominable forest, Morgan could concentrate on defending only the ruined castle and use the lake to her advantage.

Naturally, it would have been much better if Mordret had not taken the entire House of Night as his vessels, in that regard. But there

were creatures in that lake that would give even Transcendent Nightwalkers pause, not to mention that Morgan had Naeve, Aether, and Bloodwave by her side.

Both of them had come prepared for the battle for the Mirror Lake.

The second advantage was the forest itself, which was no less dreadful than the depths of the lake. Her brother would have to launch his siege from there, suffering the full brunt of the fury of the powerful Nightmare Creatures inhabiting the nebulous dark expanse.

Sadly, that was actually a sword that cut both ways.

On one hand, Mordret would have to protect himself and his vessels from those abominations without rest, which would slowly drain his power.

On the other hand, the forest would also present him a nearly inexhaustible supply of bodies to take, and the same Nightmare Creatures could become the cannon fodder he sent to ground the strength of the defenders of the castle down.

A lot of blood was going to spill… which Morgan welcomed.

The more chaos there was, the more opportunities to exploit it she would find.

The final advantage…

Introduced the most chaos, by far.

It was also the most vital, and the most dangerous of the three.

Both to Mordret and to herself.

That advantage...

Were the Others.

Chapter-1982: Open Invitation

There were no mirrors in true Bastion. Even the Great Mirror Morgan had used to switch the illusory realm with reality only existed within the illusion.

And that was for a good reason.

The Others.

Reflections had a mind of their own in true Bastion. There were strange, alien, and harrowing beings populating the mirrors here, and they could sometimes enter the real world uninvited.

Morgan did not know the details, but she knew that her family had suffered greatly, and had paid dearly, for laying claim to the stronghold of the Demon of Imagination in the distant past. This topic was a taboo that not even the elders dared to discuss.

All that she knew was that the Great Mirror had to be covered at all times, and that one had to be careful around reflective surfaces in true Bastion — especially the lake itself. There was a set of rules one had to follow here and a set of prohibitions one had to adhere to, lest they wanted to lose their lives and put the lives of others in danger.

And yet, many of the elite Knights that had been allowed here still perished in chilling ways.

Morgan herself was a bit different, because she had been forced to face and kill her own reflection not long after becoming an Awakened — her father had escorted her to the Great Mirror personally on that day, and watched the battle until it was over.

That rite of passage was… quite a memorable experience, for her.

So, she purposefully left the Great Mirror uncovered today, inviting

the Others to come.

Obviously, that made the ruins of the ancient castle dreadfully dangerous for Morgan and her six Saints.

But it was going to be far more dangerous for her brother, the Prince of Nothing, without a doubt.

After all, most of his powers had to do with mirrors. He even carried a minor Mirror Domain in his soul — something that made all attempts of defending a fortified position against him hopeless, since he could bypass almost any fortification easily by jumping between reflections.

However…

The true Bastion was one of the few places in the world — the only place, perhaps — where her brother's authority over reflections would not stay unopposed.

The powerful Nightmare Creatures dwelling in the forest were a threat to him, but the eerie beings that dwelled on the other side of mirrors were infinitely more dangerous.

After all, they could enter his domain, intercept him when he was jumping between reflections, feel his gaze when he spied through mirrors, and do many things that neither Morgan nor Mordret could even imagine.

Her brother would have to contend against the real mirror wraiths here.

That was the greatest obstacle that stood between him and conquering Bastion.

Of course, there were a few others.

Like the runic array that her father had carved into the ruins to protect them from the enemies of Clan Valor — and from her monstrous brother in particular.

Or the Sentinel Swords he had left behind.

Or the insidious influence of the shattered moon, which almost no one knew about.

That was the dire battlefield that Morgan had prepared to stack every possible advantage in her favor.

The enemy was too strong, and so, she had to be both resourceful and willing to risk it all.

Hopefully, that would be enough to stall her brother long enough for the Song Domain to fall…

But, of course, Morgan wanted more than that. She had greater ambitions than merely serving as his foil.

She wanted to win.

She wanted to win and erase the shame of her pitiful loss in Antarctica, so that she did not have to think about it again, and feel fear ever again.

'...You bastard.'

Smiling darkly, Morgan ascended the crumbling wall of the ruined fortress and looked upon the moonlit lake.

***

That had happened… ages ago.

The events unfolded pretty much exactly as Morgan had anticipated, even though she would have loved to be mistaken for once.

Not long after the real Bastion replaced its illusory twin, Mordret attacked from the depths of the dark forest.

They did not know how much he was stifled by the presence of the Others, exactly, but his power was definitely diminished quite a lot compared to Rivergate — he seemed to be reluctant to use his powers often, as if wary of something, and his usual omniscience was replaced by doubt.

Still, her brother was a fiend, and he definitely did not lack determination. That first battle was both intense and chilling, testing the very limits of their resolve and mental endurance.

The Mirror Lake boiled as the three remaining Saints of the House of Night, the vessels of the Prince of Nothing, and the dreadful Nightmare Creatures that dwelled in the depths clashed with each other in a frenzied storm of violence. The water of the lake would have turned red if it wasn't painted black by the veil of night already, and tall waves assaulted its shore.

The three government Saints and Morgan herself defended the four sides of the ruined fortress. The crumbling walls quaked and groaned, sometimes collapsing into piles of rubble, and the dark edifice of the broken keep towered above them like a gravestone.

A squall of terrifying forces was unleashed, making Morgan feel a rare moment of relief at her decision to hide the illusory Bastion in the Great Mirror.

If she hadn't, the collateral damage caused by the titanic battle among the civilian population of the city would have been incalculable.

The first battle lasted for a while, but eventually, it became apparent that neither side would be able to achieve a sweeping victory. Of course, Morgan and her Saints were still inferior to the enemy in terms of pure numbers… which was a funny thing to say, considering that their enemy was a single man.

Still, they had the advantage of being the defending side — and not only that, but being the defenders of a fortress designed specifically to protect the Valor family from its monstrous scion.

Tied by the eerie threat of the Others and bound by the runic array carved into the walls of the ancient castle, Mordret could not rely on his bizarre powers and endless tricks. He was more or less limited to only using skill and brute strength to destroy them, and although his strength was not at all lacking, Morgan and her people were quite powerful themselves.

In fact, some of them were the epitome of power.

Morgan, the Princess of War. The chilling and beautiful wraith, Soul Reaper Jet, known and feared by most Awakened. Saint Athena, Raised by Wolves — a bona fide war goddess who had led her warriors into a hopeless siege on the Forgotten Shore, and only gotten stronger and more heroic since then. Saint Kai, the Dragon Slayer…

And three last Saints of a fallen Great Clan, who burned with the desire to avenge their kin.

It was quite an epic battle. In fact, it was just the kind of battle that people would sing about centuries later… it was just a pity that no one was there to witness it, and tell the tale.

Perhaps if Nightingale picked up the microphone once again…

Chapter-1983: Besieged

In any case, Mordret could not eradicate them without resorting to extreme measures that would not only put him at great risk, but also result in dire losses among his vessels.

And it was not time yet for that.

So, eventually, he chose to retreat.

Watching the grotesque leviathans resurface and swim away, Morgan exhaled tiredly and leaned on her sword.

They had not won, exactly… but had not lost, either.

It was a reason to celebrate, and yet she was not in a festive mood.

She knew that this first battle was merely the beginning.

The battle for Bastion had not ended, it was just starting… of course, its nature would change after tonight's bloodshed.

It would become a war of attrition.

…And it had.

There had been many battles since then. Morgan and her Saints held the ruins of the castle, while Mordret settled in the forest. He had to battle the Nightmare Creatures dwelling there constantly — which was a boon for Morgan, since his vessels had already been damaged during the assaults on the ruins, and were now being worn down further by the endless onslaught of abominations.

But it was also a curse, because the same Nightmare Creatures would be then taken by her brother and sent to wear the defenders of the castle down, in turn.

If there was one mercy, it was that he seemed reluctant to control more bodies than he already controlled. Therefore, if the Nightmare Creatures attacked, the Transcendent vessels of the Prince of Nothing were absent, and vice versa.

Morgan just hoped that her brother was being drained and ground to dust by having to survive all these soul duels, just like the rest of them were being slowly battered to the ground.

Athena's prodigious strength and Nightingale's startling archery skill were of immense help in the battles against the taken forest dwellers, while Soul Reaper and the Saints of Night were indispensable when battling the human vessels of her brother.

Morgan herself had long abandoned caution and went all-out in every battle as well. Her Aspect was both formidable and versatile, as was her Transcendent Ability. Therefore, she was a devastating presence on the battlefield no matter what enemies they faced.

Somehow, they survived a week of the siege, and then another.

In the process, her brother had attempted to sneakily circle around Bastion and stage an attack on the Citadels of the Sword Domain located deeper inland.

In response, Morgan and Saint Kai launch an attack on Night Garden, almost managing to claim it before falling into a trap set for them there by Mordret.

That trap was the being he had left to guard the beached Great Citadel… a single Reflection of his, which would not usually pose a real threat to two Saints as powerful as Morgan and Kai were…

If not for the fact that this Reflection was a Supreme Titan.

In the end, they did not manage to conquer the Night Garden, barely escaping with their lives. However, they did manage to dissuade Mordret from trying to move past Bastion without eliminating its defenders first.

The siege continued, with both sides slowly studying the enemy and searching for a way to destroy them. It was intense, grueling, and

often full of dread.

However, the most dreadful part of it all was the Others.

Morgan did not know how her brother, who was much more susceptible to their sinister influence, was managing to stay alive and sane. But it was definitely a challenge for her and her Saints.

The Others were so eerie and frightening because they were alien, unknown, and unknowable. Their origin was a mystery, and so was their nature. Morgan did not even know if they were truly beings, in the full sense of that word, let alone living beings. The Others moved and acted like creatures that possessed will and even an eerie form of sentience, but she could not be sure.

They could have been mere manifestations of some mysterious force or process that simply reflected what was in front of them, thus creating a false impression of intent and intelligence.

The worst part of it all was that, unlike the Nightmare Creatures, the Others were not even necessarily malicious. The harrowing evil they perpetrated was nothing but a result of their inherently alien nature.

These beings did not seem to know or be able to fathom the natural concepts like a person's desire to stay alive, the fear of pain, the terror of having one's body and soul stolen, maimed, torn apart, or consumed. At least that was the opinion that Morgan and her Saints shared now, after witnessing the Others, and even clashing with them, several times.

But they simply could not be sure of anything, which made the sinister guests from the Mirror Realm so much more frightening.

On top of that, even fighting them was a dreadful ordeal, because the Others did not follow the conventions of power that both Awakened and the Nightmare Creatures shared.

They were neither divine nor profane. They did not seem to possess Ranks and Classes. They were not beholden to a single Aspect or a set of unholy powers. Instead, they were entirely unfathomable and unpredictable, making every battle with them a chilling affair.

Some of the Others were surprisingly weak, and were easily destroyed by the Saints. Some, however, possessed a harrowing power that made them utterly lethal, while their bizarre nature made obliterating them a dangerous and difficult undertaking.

Morgan had almost lost Saint Aether that way during the early days of the siege… which would have been quite a disaster, considering that he was the closest thing she had to a healer.

Luckily, the Nightwalker had survived in the end, even if his eyes seemed a little haunted to this day.

'Poor guy.'

Morgan herself had grown up knowing about the Others and brushing against the eerie mystery of their existence from time to time, so these dreadful encounters were nothing new to her.

The government Saints were taking it surprisingly well, too, but the Saints of Night were rattled.

'How much longer?'

Letting out a sigh, she shivered in the cold, looked at her bloodied tunic in disgust, and walked toward the lake to take a plunge.

Chapter-1984: Beneath the Surface

The Mirror Lake hid unspeakable horrors, so very few people would have dared to bathe in it.

But Morgan did not care.

She had no choice but to come to this dark place, and for her, there was no escape from the war. The siege was not going to end any time soon, but she could at least endeavor to not spend the rest of it feeling dirty.

It was her home, anyway.

The black water was deceptively tranquil and still, reflecting the moonlit heavens. Stepping into it was like stepping into the night sky, and bathing in it was like bathing in stars.

Enjoying the cold embrace of the lake, Morgan sighed in contentment and studied her reflection.

It was important to know that her reflection was not doing anything strange, like tracing her movements with its gaze or trying to speak. Morgan was safer than most from being preyed on by the Others, since she had killed her reflection many years ago… but she still had to be careful.

Her reflection was prim and proper, staring at her back with two vibrant vermilion eyes, which seemed to glow softly in the darkness.

Sending it a smile, Morgan cautiously pulled off her bloodied tunic.

She knew that Saint Kai was probably blushing and hurriedly turning away somewhere in the ruins, but she did not care. That dirty thing

was disgusting, and she was determined to give it a good wash…

The only problem was that the frayed fabric parted under her fingers, and several new cuts appeared on its surface.

Morgan cursed her Flaw quietly. Her tunic was made from mystical cloth and could usually withstand her touch, but now, it had become tattered and fragile. Feeling a bit dejected, she crouched to wash the blood off the black fabric.

She should have packed more thoroughly before sending the illusory Bastion into the Great Mirror. Sure, there were supplies in the real castle, and she even had her own living quarters here… but that part of the ruin crumbled in one of the countless battles, burying her wardrobe under the rubble.

That had been a painful loss.

Morgan rinsed her tunic swiftly, then walked deeper into the cold water to wash the blood off her body.

At that moment, there was a subtle movement under the surface, and something slippery wrapped itself around her shin.

Instead of pulling her into the depths, however, the flesh of the Nightmare Creature parted and bled, as if it had wrapped around a sharp blade.

Morgan raised her hand indifferently. A split second later, it rippled like liquid metal and turned into a long spear, which extended downward with terrible speed and pierced the surface of the lake.

The Spell whispered softly into her ear, announcing the death of a Corrupted Monster.

Morgan smiled.

'I guess we have dinner.'

At that moment, someone coughed behind her.

Morgan retracted her monstrously long javelin, allowed it to turn

back into a human hand, and unhurriedly pulled the wet tunic back onto her pale body.

This time, there were no new cuts.

'Good!'

Feeling clean and refreshed, she turned around and walked back to the shore.

Speak of the devil… there was Nightingale, standing at the edge of the water and looking at the sky politely. She had not heard his steps, so he must have descended from above.

Morgan had once assumed that Saint Kai would be quite accustomed to these kinds of situations as a former entertainment star, but he was strangely shy. His sense of decorum was also better than that of most noble Legacies, which was both funny and disheartening to see as the noblest of them.

…And that bastard somehow managed to look cleaner and more put-together than her despite the fact that Morgan had literally just bathed!

Walking out of the water, she swept her hair back and tried to hide her irritation.

"What is it?"

Nightingale finally looked down.

"I saw movement in the forest, Lady Morgan. It appears that there is going to be another attack soon."

Morgan frowned.

The timing was… unfortunate.

Both Naeve and Bloodwave were yet to recover from the wounds they had received several days ago, even with Aether's help — that was why she had held them back yesterday.

Soul Reaper was strangely inefficient as of late, as well, for whatever reason… strangely enough, she had been diving into the lake to hunt Nightmare Creatures despite her weakened state.

'Why is he in such a hurry?'

Mordret used to space out his assaults, but now, they were becoming more frequent.

Morgan contemplated the issue for a moment.

'Something must have changed in Godgrave.'

They received news of how the war was going from time to time. The last thing she heard was that Nephis, Gilead, and the Lord of Shadows had clashed with the daughters of Ki Song in the Hollows, and that Seishan had finally conquered a Citadel for the Song Domain.

Which meant that the Queen herself must have arrived to Godgrave, already.

The two armies were going to clash soon.

Was that what lit a fire under her brother?

'Is he worried that she will kill our father before he can do it himself?'

That was a delusional fear to harbor, but then again, that man was not known for having a sound mind.

Letting out a quiet sigh, Morgan glanced at the lake, knowing that her plans of fishing out the Transcendent Monster she had killed and roasting it were ruined.

"Thank you for letting me know, Saint Kai. Please gather the rest and prepare for battle. Oh... and don't stare at the sky too much. Especially at the shards of the moon."

She summoned her armor back, even though it would not have had any time to repair itself. The vermilion cloak weaved itself from scarlet sparks, draped around her shoulders.

A nicked sword appeared in her hand.

Morgan smiled.

The uncle and nephew pair were indeed wounded, but several of Mordret's vessels had been shredded quite thoroughly when they last appeared, as well.

If things went well today, she stood a good chance of reducing the number of Transcendent shells her brother possessed.

Of course, there was also the chance of losing a couple of her own Saints.

That would be a real shame.

But still…

'How many of his vessels do I need to destroy, and how dire the situation in Godgrave must become for him to grow desperate enough to jump into my soul?'

Her scarlet eyes glistened with sharp light.

Morgan lingered for a moment, and then sighed.

'I hope it happens before my tunic completely falls apart…'

Chapter-1985: Ruined Fortress

Tonight, her brother had decided to try something new.

Instead of launching simultaneous attacks from the four cardinal directions, he seemed to be gathering his forces in the south, where the walls of the fallen castle were the most damaged.

Nightingale had noticed movement between the ancient trees, but sadly, he could not tell them more about what was happening in the dark forest — one of Mordret's vessels possessed an Aspect that allowed him to hide himself from the gazes of living beings.

There were ways to predict the timing of the attack, though.

Morgan was looking at the shifting line where the water touched the ruin. After a while, there was a shallow wave, and the lake seemed to climb up a little, swallowing more of the ancient stone.

She sighed.

"Typhaon has entered the lake."

Typhaon had been one of the most powerful Saints of the House of Night… as well as Aether's father. Now, however, he was one of the most powerful vessels in Mordret's possession, and a true curse for the defenders of Bastion.

His Transcendent form was so immense and terrifying that his presence on the battlefield could be traced by simply paying attention to the lake. When he transformed, the amount of displaced water was so great that the level of the lake rose visibly.

It was an ill omen.

Standing by her side, Aether looked down, his handsome face turning

grim and distant. Naeve and Bloodwave shifted slightly — it was that monster who had wounded them so severely in the last battle against the Transcendent vessels of the Prince of Nothing.

A moment later, there was another wave, and the water rose even more.

Morgan smiled.

"The big octopus is also coming. How wonderful."

Saint Knossos was another heavy hitter among the Transcendent champions taken by her brother. Not too long ago, he was one of the pillars of the Great Clan, as well as its elder — and before that, he had been Nightwalker's peer and the head of one of the Stormsea Clans that joined together to form the House of Night.

Nightwalker himself was long gone, but Knossos had survived decades of trials and tribulations of the Nightmare Spell.

He did not survive Mordret of Nowhere, though.

Now, his body was one of the most dire threats to Morgan and her Saints. His Transformation was that of a gargantuan kraken, and together with Typhaon, these two abominable creatures were the hammer with which her brother bludgeoned the defenders of the ruined castle every battle.

The rest of his vessels all possessed powerful Transcendent forms, but none could compare to the sheer size and terror of the two behemoths.

Morgan inhaled deeply and listened to the night for a few moments.

The world was at peace. The lake was still and silent, with a beautiful tapestry of stars reflecting on its surface. The water murmured as it washed the shore, and a mild wind sang in the moonlit darkness.

This was her home, her birthright, and her burden.

That stillness was not going to last long.

She looked across the lake, studying the distant shore.

"Prepare yourself. It's starting."

Just a few moments after she spoke, the lake suddenly grew restless, and taller waves crashed into the rubble.

"Aether, Athena."

Those two were their vanguard. Aether silently leaped off the wall and dashed toward the lake, but Raised by Wolves lingered for a moment and glanced at Morgan.

It was a bit irritating to crane her neck to look the tall beauty in the eyes, but Morgan obliged.

"Yes?"

Saint Athena smiled.

"Your Royal Highness, venerable Princess Morgan… how many times have I told you to call me Effie?"

Morgan's brow twitched a little.

She remained silent for a moment, then answered with a forced smile:

"About the same amount of times as telling me to put some meat on my bones?"

Her unruly subordinate laughed while jumping down.

"Well, you should! Even my son is less picky with his food!"

A few moments later, she landed on the rubble below and followed Aether with unhurried steps.

Morgan held back the urge to roll her eyes.

'What nonsense. I am not picky.'

...She just had standards.

As she watched, Aether reached the lake. Unlike his two clanmates, the younger Saint did not possess an Aspect tied to the depths — instead, his lineage had manifested itself in the startling affinity to the night sky and starlight.

Still, he wasn't helpless when surrounded by water.

Instead of plunging into the lake, Aether simply stepped onto its surface and continued to move forward.

Behind him, on the shore, Athena activated her Ascended Ability. In the next moment, Morgan felt a rush of invigorating power permeate her body. Her pale cheeks flushed a little, and a hot breath escaped from her mouth.

She felt strong, tireless, and full of unbridled potency.

Every time Morgan experienced this exhilarating sensation, she understood why Raised by Wolves was so beloved by the government soldiers and the civilian population better... among other things, of course.

The rest of her Saints were feeling the effect of Athena's power as well. Despite the fatigue and exhaustion of the past weeks, they suddenly looked impatient to join the fray.

Bloodwave gave Morgan a long look and asked, his deep voice sending shivers running down her spine:

"What about us?"

She shook her head lightly.

"Stay back. We'll face them on land today."

The white-haired Saint scowled, but listened to her order.

It would be a disadvantage to leave him and Naeve out of the water, thus incapable of using their Aspects fully.

But Morgan had a bad feeling about today's attack. It was high time for her brother to come up with some new diabolical tactic…

And more importantly than that, she had her own diabolical plans as well.

For them to come to fruition, she had to lure the enemy away from the lake.

Soul Reaper simply leaned on her ghostly glaive, looking at the surging water with a lazy smile. Her icy blue eyes were cold and ruthless.

"Staying on land suits me fine. It's quite a welcome change, really."

Behind her, Nightingale silently summoned his bow and rose into the air, looking at the lake intently.

His mesmerizing green eyes seemed to glisten in the darkness, reflecting the pale moonlight.

A moment later, his expression tensed.

Morgan sighed, knowing that she would not like what he was about to say.

"What is it?"

Saint Kai sighed.

"...They're dragging corpses across the bottom of the lake, leaving trails of blood behind."

He hesitated for a moment, and then added with a hint of dejection:

"I think we'll have more guests today than we anticipated."

Chapter-1986: Baiting the Monster

Morgan sighed as she saw the water break in a dozen places, far in the distance, and grotesque tentacles shoot from the depths. Carried in them were the massive corpses of the Nightmare Creatures that dwelled in the forest — some of them the very same Nightmare Creatures whom she and her Saints had wounded, but failed to finish off in yesterday's battle.

The corpses were launched into the air like morbid projectiles, tracing low arcs as they trailed torrents of blood behind them. One was shot down by Nightingale, who had drawn his bow in the blink of an eye. Another exploded into a cloud of bloody haze when a pebble tossed casually by Raised by Wolves collided with it midair.

But the rest landed on the rubble with disgusting squelching noises, some crashing into the wall and making it tremble with deafening thunderclaps.

A series of shockwaves rolled across the lake, making the water ripple.

Morgan studied the bloody mess left in the wake of the obliterated corpses with a dubious expression.

"Leave it to my brother to find a common language with the Nightmare Creatures…"

The effects of this spectacular blood offering were already letting themselves be known. The lake boiled, and dozens of hideous shapes rose from its dark depths, following the scent of blood…

Following it to the shore.

It seemed that the Prince of Nothing had finally found a way to attack the ruined fortress with both Transcendent and Corrupted forces at the same time.

Grimacing, Morgan summoned a bow and shouted a command:

"Aether, Athena! Let loose!"

As they heeded her command, she briefly glanced at the bow in her hand.

This one, she had received in her Third Nightmare. It was a good bow, but she still missed her old one… the bow that her father had forged for her.

It was not the only Memory he had given her, and Morgan had never cherished the Warbow that much — she was primarily a swordsman, after all. Still, it had been a loyal companion to her for quite some time.

Strangely enough, Morgan did not remember what fate befell that Memory. Had it been destroyed in Antarctica? Or had she simply returned it to the arsenal of Clan Valor after Transcending, knowing that an Ascended Memory would not be worthy of her strength anymore?

She seemed to have a vague recollection of bestowing it upon someone… interesting. And cute? One of the promising Knights, perhaps...

She couldn't remember.

'What was I thinking about?'

Suspecting that she had not gotten enough sleep, Morgan summoned an arrow and nocked it on the string.

Below the wall, Aether and Athena were starting.

The Saint of Night was standing on the surface of the water, not far from the shore, bathed in moonlight. Above him, distant stars shimmered with a silver radiance.

And as the waters of the lake suddenly rippled all around him, that radiance suddenly grew brighter.

Morgan could not see Aether's eyes, but if she could, she would have witnessed them shining with cold silver light.

In the next moment, the sharp rays of starlight seemed to solidify, raining on the lake like a radiant net.

The depth dwellers that had risen their hideous heads above the water were cut terribly by the falling strings of light, letting out pained wails as their fetid blood poured into the lake.

Some received only shallow wounds, some were hurt quite badly. One lake monster had even lost much of its head — it was still alive, but the other abominations were already rushing in its direction. Soon, the water boiled, and the wounded abomination was torn apart by its own brethren.

There was no honor among the Nightmare Creatures.

Athena was less flashy in her attack, but even more devastating. Looking around, she chose a slab of stone the size of a PTV, picked it up easily, and tossed it in the direction of the attacking abomination with terrifying force.

The giant piece of stone tore through the air with dire speed and fell into the lake like a bomb, causing a tall fountain of foam to shoot into the sky.

Although it was quite dark, Morgan could tell that the foam was not white, but crimson — Athena rarely missed, so her crude projectile must have obliterated at least one enormous abomination completely.

A moment later, her own arrow found its way between the scales of an especially revolting Nightmare Creature, exploding from the back of its misshapen head in a torrent of gore.

Nightingale was releasing another arrow, as well — having the advantage of a high vantage point, he was even more deadly.

Morgan was not usually competitive without reason, but falling

behind her subordinate was a shameful thing.

Smiling faintly, she strained her muscles and drew the heavy bow again.

In the next minute or so, both the surface and the depths of the lake had turned into a scene of bloody slaughter, with a storm of starlight raging across it like a beautiful mirage.

The Nightmare Creatures stirred awake by the scent of blood were all powerful, the weakest of them of the Corrupted Rank.

And yet, the Saints defending Bastion were not weak, either. Aether's starlight, Athena's barbaric projectiles, and the arrows sent flying by Morgan and Kai fused into a devastating barrage, mangling the bodies of the abominations and reaping their lives.

Sadly, it was not as deadly as she would have wanted. Killing a Great Abomination was no easy feat even for Saints, after all — several of them had to concentrate their attacks on the more powerful dwellers of the depths and waste quite a bit of time to bring a single one down, while the rest were free to reduce the distance between them and the shore unopposed.

Which was a cause for concern.

And throughout all of it, even consumed by the thrill of the battle, Morgan was keeping an eye on the lake and the dark shore beyond. She could not miss the moment her brother decided to join the battle.

'...Where are you?'

Frowning a little, Morgan lowered her bow for a moment and bellowed:

"Aether! Retreat!"

She was disappointed. She had hoped that using their only healer as bait would produce more of a result.

The Nightmare Creatures were already dangerously close to where the Saint of Night was standing on water. Sparing one look at the

approaching horrors, he turned around and dashed back toward the ruins.

Athena covered his retreat by sending an especially enormous piece of rubble barreling through the air.

It displaced a veritable flood of water, causing towering waves to spread in all directions from the point of impact.

And when the plume of foaming water fell down, Morgan finally saw what she had been searching for.

Behind it, in the distance, a gargantuan fin rose above the surface of the lake, cutting it like a colossal blade.

Typhaon was coming.

…Or rather, her brother was, wearing the once-fearsome Saint as a suit.

Chapter-1987: Siege of Bastion

The Nightmare Creatures had reached the shore, crawling out of the surging lake like a swarm of horrors that had escaped the forbidden depths of Pandora's box. In the darkness of the night, their wet, slithering figures glistened with the ghostly radiance of reflected moonlight. Enormous limbs rose high into the air and plummeted down, making the ruin shake as they sank into the rubble to pull the monstrous bodies onto land.

This time, of course, it was not Pandora who had opened the mystical box out of curiosity.

Instead, Morgan's monstrous brother had done it out of malice.

Still, she wasn't too concerned.

…If these poor creatures had known any better, they would have stayed in the depths. They would have guessed that the box had not been locked to contain the horrors inside — instead, it had been locked to protect them from the true monsters that dwelled beyond.

Witnessing the chilling tide of abominations, Soul Reaper smiled.

"I guess it's my turn."

She did not seem particularly impressed by the sheer dread and splendor of the chilling scene. The blue-eyed wraith remained calm and laid-back, as if facing a swarm of Great and Corrupted abominations was not a death sentence for most Saints.

Then again, this Saint in particular had long proven that death was afraid of her, and not the other way around.

Morgan gave her a brief look.

"Lure them into the ruins."

Jet raised an eyebrow, amused.

"They'll topple the wall."

Morgan looked at the crumbling wall they were standing on. This great fortress — what remained of it — was her ancestral home. Three generations of the Valor family had dwelled here, and it was from these ruins that the glorious Sword Domain was born.

She shrugged impassively.

"Let them topple it, then."

Her brother was determined to stop at nothing to destroy Valor. There was no step he would hesitate to take, and no sacrifice he was unwilling to make.

That was how one won a war.

And Morgan... Morgan was the Princess of War. She was prepared to sacrifice the entire world if it meant achieving victory, let alone these ancient walls.

Soul Reaper smiled crookedly, then picked up her war scythe, raised it above her shoulder… and tossed it forward with tremendous force, as if throwing a javelin.

At the same time, her body turned into a torrent of mist and swirled around the scythe, being carried away from the safety of the fortress by its pull.

Far below, Aether had reached Athena's position and dashed past her, rushing back toward the wall. Raised By Wolves herself lingered, summoning a long spear and looking at the approaching tide of abominations with a grim expression.

It was then that the ghostly war scythe landed among the Nightmare Creatures. Suddenly, a chilling mist exploded from it in all directions, obscuring the view.

A moment later, haunting wails resounded from within the veil of mist, echoing across the restless lake.

Morgan had no time to pay attention to that part of the battlefield anymore. The Nightmare Creatures, calamitous as they were — just a couple of them could have destroyed all of humanity a few decades ago — were merely a diversion today.

The true threat was her brother.

"Athena, retreat!"

Below the wall, Raised by Wolves stared at the cloud of mist with a complicated expression, then gritted her teeth and dashed back.

Morgan could see Typhaon's fin towering above the surface of the lake as it cut the surging water. Her brother was moving around the ruins, threatening to attack them from the east.

At the same time, a vast swathe of the lake west of the crumbling castle boiled, revealing glimpses of gargantuan tentacles and an abominable body surfacing from the depths.

There were more Transcendent vessels advancing from the south, as well.

Morgan scowled for a moment, calculating the timing.

'...He got me good, this time.'

Her vermilion eyes glistened in the darkness.

Despite the head start, Aether reached the battlements at the same time as Athena. Morgan studied them for a moment, then spoke evenly:

"Nightingale… intercept Knossos and his retinue, if you will. Athena, stall Typhaon for as long as you can."

After Soul Reaper, these two were her strongest champions. In fact, they were no weaker than the former pillars of the House of Night, Typhaon and Knossos, had been — despite being decades younger

and far less experienced. Morgan even suspected that they would have slain the legendary Saints in battle, if given the chance to face them one-on-one.

Sadly, the two Stormsea Saints were dead, and it was Mordret controlling their bodies now. Not only was her brother fearsome, but he was also shrewd and cunning, never letting his most powerful vessels face her best warriors without an advantage.

So, she could only hope to stall them today.

Athena sighed, then dismissed her spear and crouched. A moment later, the crumbling wall shook, and the stones under her feet cracked — the beautiful Saint soared into the air in a stunning leap, seemingly flying toward the swiftly approaching fin.

As she flew, her body, which seemed to be cast of polished steel, expanded in size.

By the time Raised by Wolves landed in the water, she was a steel colossus at least a hundred meters in height. A great wave rose from her plunge into the lake, and a deafening thunderclap rolled across the lake, making the trees on the distant shore sway.

She was standing far away from the ruined fortress, and yet, the water barely reached her thighs.

The lake was deep enough to swallow even a giant like Athena, but she had chosen her battlefield carefully — there, the water was deep enough to lure Tyhaon to come, but not so deep as to leave her no fighting chance.

Of course, she could have fought him at the bottom of the lake, if she so wished. Saints could hold their breath for a long time, after all — however, fighting a Transcendent of the House of Night in the depths was something that only people with a death wish would do.

…Almost at the same time, a graceful figure dashed across the black sky, rushing west.

Nightingale assumed his Transcendent form as he flew, and soon, moonlight glistened on the beautiful scales of a majestic dragon. His

great body was dark like the night sky, and his eyes were like silver stars. The vast shadow of his wings covered the tall waves, raising up a hurricane.

Morgan sighed.

The three government Saints were each handling an overwhelming foe.

But it was up to her and the Saints of Night to face the most dreadful adversary.

Chapter-1988: Ruin Has Come to Our Family

To the west of the crumbling castle, a vast swath of the lake seemed to boil with foam as a seething mass of dark tentacles rose from below. The gargantuan tentacles reached for the moonlit sky like a primordial forest, each aiming to catch, crush, smother, and tear the swift enemy apart.

Or bring the enemy down to the depths, into the dark chasm of the creature's harrowing maw.

The size of the enormous kraken was so immense that it easily dwarfed the great dragon, making him seem small and insignificant in comparison.

However, the Night Singer was undeterred.

Folding his wings, the dragon dove down, piercing through the palisade of towering tentacles with dire speed. His voice resounded above the lake, making their movements grow slow and sluggish; in the next moment, a haunting song resounded above the lake, and a devastating sonic wave crashed into the foaming water, producing a deafening explosion.

Countless tons of water were displaced and thrown into the air, obscuring the view.

…It was really a daunting thing, to witness the dreadful battle between the ruler of the depths and the monarch of the skies. Reality itself seemed to contort and groan from the dire forces unleashed by their tyrannical clash, as if moments away from cracking and crumbling down.

Sadly, Morgan did not have time to pay close attention to the battle

between Nightingale and the Kraken.

Nor did she have time to observe the clash between Athena and the monstrous creature, Typhaon.

The giant fin had risen even higher above the water, and then, the behemoth's fearsome body was finally revealed. He slowly emerged from the deeper part of the lake, straightening as giant waterfalls flowed from his impenetrable scales.

Typhaon was vaguely humanoid in shape. He had a powerful body that towered even above the War Colossus, Saint Athena. However, where she was lean and graceful, the monster of the depths was broad and mighty. His figure bulged with muscles that resembled tectonic plates, and his skin was covered by a natural carapace of unbreakable scales.

He had sharp, ridge-like fins protruding from his back, his forearms, and his thighs — those were like colossal blades, capable of slicing armored ships in half.

Instead of two legs, Typhaon had four flexible, pillar-like limbs that resembled long tentacles. His head was bestial and appalling, crowned by enormous horns, and there were two monstrous serpents growing from behind his shoulders, each with long twisting necks and terrifying needle-like fangs crowding their maws.

He looked like a dark deity whom the abominable Drowned would have worshiped. Morgan had never been to the Great River, so she could not draw the parallel…

However, Effie — who knew the Drowned all too well — could.

She grimaced with resentment and braced herself, preparing to endure the assault of the titanic fiend of the depths.

When the two goliaths collided, the entire world shuddered and shook.

All throughout the ruin, shards of stone fell from the crumbling walls and scattered on the piles of rubble.

Morgan winced.

Below the wall, the cloud of swirling mist was flowing up the shore, already nearing the wall. The chilling wails and muffled thunderclaps were still resounding from within it, proving that Soul Reaper was engaged in a deadly dance with the swarm of abominations.

Her insidious Aspect was capable of destroying souls directly, and Morgan suspected that that was the only reason why there were no rivers of blood flowing back into the lake from within the icy fog.

Finally, the first tendrils of mist washed over the stone wall, and she looked at the Saints of Night.

"We are retreating to the second ring."

Naeve hesitated for a moment.

"Wouldn't that give that man more room to surround us?"

She smiled darkly.

"His forces are spread thin, too."

There was always the risk that her brother would choose to attack either Nightingale or Raised by Wolves from the back instead of going to her and her remaining Saints… however, the possibility was not high.

After all, he was being weakened by the prolonged siege, just like them. In fact, time was his most fearsome foe. And while Morgan lacked the ability to end the battle swiftly by decapitating the enemy, Mordret could — all he had to do was kill her.

That tempting possibility would dictate his actions, even if he knew that it made him more predictable.

Morgan turned around.

The four of them abandoned the outer walls and swiftly reached the second defensive ring deeper in the ruins. It was situated higher than the outer wall, too, so they could see the battle more clearly from

there.

So, they saw the moment when the walls of Bastion fell in perfect detail.

Even though Morgan had anticipated the inevitable destruction of the outer rampart, watching the ancient wall crumble still rattled her.

No one knew who or what had shattered the moon and brought the proud citadel of the Demon of Imagination to ruin in the distant past. However, what remained of it had withstood thousands of years of neglect and desolation, never surrendering to the wrath of the Nightmare Creatures.

Until humans… she and her brother… came.

A wide section of the wall collapsed, raising a billowing cloud of dust. Mist poured through the breach, followed by the enormous shapes of advancing abominations. They spilled from the breach like a tide — there were fewer of them than before, and many seemed to be in agony, their movements slow and listless.

Still, Nightmare Creatures had invaded Bastion for the first time since her grandfather had conquered this great Citadel.

Morgan sighed lightly and cast her gaze further, at the shore of the surging lake.

There, more creatures were emerging from the water.

These ones were no less terrifying, and yet, they were no Nightmare Creatures. Instead, they were Transcendent vessels of her brother.

As she watched, several of them retained their monstrous forms, while others turned into humans.

One figure in particular caught her eyes.

…He was looking at her, too.

Morgan gritted her teeth.

'So, he came personally this time.'

Far away, her brother smiled and gave her a mocking bow.

Snarling, Morgan looked away and turned to the Saints of Night.

"The main guest has arrived. Let's give him and his entourage a warm welcome..."

Chapter-1989: Home Sweet Home

Morgan had her bow, and the Saints of Night had already summoned their weapons.

In this battle, their strength would be stifled by having to fight on land. However, that did not mean that they were powerless — far from it.

Naeve was wearing light, but immensely resilient armor sewn from the skin of some unknown sea monster, wielding a long harpoon made of bone as a spear. His indigo eyes seemed to glow in the moonlight, and his handsome face was both somber and cold.

Bloodwave had summoned a heavy armor forged from dull metal, which made his towering figure seem even more formidable. He was armed with a heavy cutlass — there were two of them before, but one had been destroyed in one of the previous battles. Now, the taciturn Saint simply used the claws of his steel gauntlet to rend the flesh of his enemies.

Aether reached toward the sky, grasping a ray of starlight and manifesting it into a thin blade. The youngest of the Saints did not possess as much physical strength as the rest of them, but made up for it with speed and skill. The weapons he could weave from starlight were absolutely lethal… still, his Aspect was not suited for close combat that well.

Not that anyone was suited well for facing Mordret.

Today, the defenders of the crumbling fortress were weaker than they had ever been. Morgan's three most powerful champions were away, each dealing with their own crisis.

Her brother, meanwhile, still possessed more than enough vessels to take the castle. Some of them were following Knossos and Typhaon, but ten — including his true body — were here.

They had already scaled the outer wall, avoiding the cloud of mist and the Nightmare Creatures that were still fighting Soul Reaper within it. Mordret himself lingered at the top of the rampart, looking up at the second ring of the battlements.

Despite the apocalyptic noise of the battle, his voice reached Morgan and her Saints clearly.

"Ah… how sweet it is, to finally come home."

Despite the sweet words, his tone was deep and dark, full of nothing but coldness and malice.

He smiled.

"Aren't you going to welcome me, sister?"

Instead of an answer, Morgan sent an arrow flying his way.

Laughing, Mordret swatted it away with his sword. As the Spell whispered in her ear, announcing the Memory's destruction, her brother and his vessels leaped off the outer wall and rushed toward the second ring.

'I guess he's done being sentimental.'

Morgan sighed and dismissed her bow, summoning a sword instead.

All around Bastion, runes carved into the ancient stone suddenly lit up with ethereal light as its enchantment array came alive.

Before, Sentinel Swords left behind by her father would come alive and fall like steel rain on the heads of the invaders. Many other deadly enchantments would activate, as well, enveloping the ruined fortress in a defensive net.

Sadly, most of the array's power had been exhausted in the past few weeks. The Sentinel Swords had been shattered one after another, the

reserves of essence powering the array had been drained, and many of the runes forming it had been found and destroyed.

Now, the colossal enchantment was a pale shadow of its former self.

It still did one thing particularly well, however…

It restricted both the Others and the Aspect powers of the Prince of Nothing.

Here in the crumbling fortress, he could only rely on brute strength to obliterate its defenders.

Morgan raised her sword and prepared to fight.

Four Saints against ten Transcendent vessels of a murderous madman — the odds were not too great.

…For her brother, that was.

Because while he could not use his Aspect, Morgan could still use hers.

Activating one of the enchantments stored in her body, she sensed dire strength permeating her very being. Time seemed to slow down a little.

Smiling viciously, Morgan dashed forward and met the first of the Transcendent vessels as it leaped onto the wall.

Those of the taken Saints who could move on land in their Transcendent forms had kept them. Those who could not had become humans again.

Each of them looked different, but all — both humans and creatures — had the same cold, inhuman, unfeeling look in their eyes.

With dark flames of boundless wrath burning beneath the cold surface.

Morgan crossed swords with one of the human vessels, throwing it back off the wall. But in the next moment, she had to dodge back as a

gargantuan clawed hand fell on the battlements, sending a rain of sparks flying in all directions.

The claws bit into the ancient stone, and a hideous snout rose above the parapet, resembling that of a giant crocodile. The triangular fangs snapped, almost taking Morgan's arm off… or at least catching her in a crushing trap.

Her body was as hard as steel, so her limbs were not that easily separated from it.

A moment later, two swift figures dashed past the crocodile's head, and she had to defend herself from two insidious blows.

Morgan managed to deflect one, but the second scratched against her armor. Worse than that, the enchanted blade seemed to have left a corrosive film in its wake, making the black steel of her breastplate boil and flow down in thin streams of bubbling metal.

That was what made her brother so deadly.

Not the number of his vessels, and not their power.

It was their perfect coordination, which allowed them to fight as different parts of the same organism.

Because they were.

If it were any other pair of enemies, Morgan would have managed to evade both blows, but the vessels of the Prince of Nothing left no chance to the enemy.

'Damn it.'

Ten of them…

The enormous crocodile head rose into the air, revealing an immense neck. The creature's body was both reptilian and humanlike in nature, and it was truly enormous, standing almost as tall as the wall. The towering creature unleashed another blow at the battlements, making a section of them crumble from the obliterating force of the impact, and outstretched a mighty hand. A hurricane of sparks

swirled around it, starting to form into a giant bronze trident.

Morgan pursed her lips.

On both sides of her, Naeve, Bloodwave, and Aether had already clashed with the remaining six vessels of the Prince of Nothing.

Mordret himself was holding back, for now, waiting to see if Morgan had prepared any traps for him.

'...Should I be flattered? He really seems to have a very high opinion of my abilities.'

Well… who could blame him?

After all, she did have a trap prepared.

In fact, this whole battle, and this whole siege, had been a carefully constructed trap.

Chapter-1990: Iron Maiden

Morgan knew how devious and monstrous her brother was.

In Antarctica, he had been weaker than her. He had been slower than her. Even his technique, while stellar, had been inferior to hers.

He had not commanded an army or possessed a force of powerful Echoes, either.

And yet, he had turned her nearly assured victory into a defeat.

Even if it had seemed like the forces of Valor would have prevailed before the descent of the Nightmare Gates, in the end, Morgan herself would not have lived long enough to see their triumph — she would have been dead, slain by that fiend.

So, she knew how fearsome her brother was.

However…

She also noticed how he had changed after coming to the shores of the Sword Domain.

Even his mask of pleasant friendliness was gone, replaced by the inhuman emptiness that Mordret had usually kept hidden in the past.

He must have dreamed of his revenge for a long, long time… for many long years, locked in a dark room in the Night Temple, waiting and dreaming of visiting death and ruin upon those who had locked him there. His family.

So, now that his goal was at hand, the Prince of Nothing had lost some of his flawlessly maintained composure.

He was being impatient.

And since he was also monstrously strong, Morgan knew how to use his impatience and turn it into arrogance.

From that first battle at Rivergate, she had been carefully hiding her true strength.

She had not revealed it even when her life was in danger… and when the lives of her Saints were in danger, either.

That was because even while unleashing his thirst for vengeance, her brother was still supremely cautious.

So, Morgan had to wait.

She had waited for many long weeks, methodically reinforcing the notion of her lacking strength in his mind.

Mordret was a monster, but there were still remnant pieces of humanity left in the depths of his abominable soul.

He already despised Valor, and therefore felt contempt for his younger sister. Deep down, he wanted to prove that he was better than her. Stronger than her. Smarter than her… that his father had chosen wrong when casting him aside, and choosing to elevate Morgan instead.

It was for that reason, and because of having already defeated her once, that Mordret had to be prone to underestimating Morgan. He already wanted to believe that she was below him in all regards, after all — so, showing him weakness over and over again was bound to reinforce that subconscious bias.

However, Morgan was not weak.

She was just waiting.

And now, finally, the day she had been waiting for was here.

…Granted, the situation was still terrible. She had hoped to decimate Mordret's forces in one fell swoop, but he had proven to be too monstrously, unreasonably powerful.

It tasted bitter to admit… that he was indeed much stronger than her.

As a result, Morgan could only hope to level the playing field and assure that the siege would last for a while longer with her carefully prepared trap.

But there was no escaping it. Her Saints were already battered and worn out, losing more of their strength with each day. If she continued to stall for time, it would be her forces that suffered fatal losses, not his.

'...A pity.'

Morgan deflected a glancing blow of the enemy's sword, somehow managed to push another aside with the pommel of her own, and then gasped when the towering reptile's trident brushed against her side.

Her armor caved a little, and she was thrown back, slamming into the parapet of the battlements. A net of fractures spread through the ancient stone, and a rain of debris fell down… she groaned and straightened slowly, tasting blood on her tongue.

Feeling beaten and tired, Morgan glanced east, caught a glimpse of Athena, and felt new strength flood her veins.

Her cracked helmet collapsed into a rain of sparks.

Sensing cool air on her heated face, Morgan smiled crookedly, looked past the hideous head of the humanlike reptile — one of the strongest vessels in Mordret's possession after Typhaon and Knossos — and pierced her brother with a dark gaze.

The fiend was still refusing to join the fray...

Or rather, refusing to risk his original body. In truth, each of these vessels was him, and he was already engaged in the battle.

Why was he so cautious? She had hoped to destroy that original body today…

But the gargantuan crocodile would have to do.

"Hey, brother…"

Standing some distance away, Mordret looked at her without any particular emotion.

His lips twisted into a false smile.

"Are you ready to surrender, sister? Or, wait. Are you going to run away again? Go and ask our father for help, per chance? I'm sure he can spare a few Echoes…"

Morgan let out a hollow laugh and watched as the giant reptile raised its trident to deliver another blow. The other two Transcendent vessels had not been idle while Mordret was talking either, having already flanked her.

She lingered for a moment, and grinned.

"...Why are you calling him our father, anyway? You bastard."

Mordret's expression finally changed, bringing her great satisfaction.

In the next moment, Morgan's smile disappeared, replaced with a cold and ruthless expression.

And her body turned to liquid steel.

The torrent of it swallowed the black armor and rushed forward like a flood. In the past, Morgan had only used this Transcendent Ability to change parts of her body into blades or grow in size, becoming a steel giant of about ten meters in height. A few times, she had even mimicked the forms of other creatures… but that was not all she could do.

She had held back the true extent of her power until now.

Becoming a sword?

Who wanted that…

A sword could cut flesh, and in the right hand, it could even cut souls.

But it could not cut the world.

It could not wield itself, and force its own will upon existence.

Morgan was going to do exactly that.

A torrent of liquid metal rushed forward, expanding in size until it was like a river. It instantly swallowed the two Transcendent vessels that had been rushing to attack her from the sides, slicing their bodies apart and extinguishing the false sparks of life that burned in their dead chests.

Then, it dove off the wall and wrapped itself around the colossal reptile like a snake made of mercury.

The humanoid crocodile was truly gargantuan, standing as tall as the fortress wall. But finally unleashed, Morgan was able to envelop it almost entirely.

And there was no escape from her iron embrace… she had absorbed quite a lot of mystical steel in the past four years, after all. The swords her father had forged, as well as the shards of the destroyed Sentinel Swords, had reinforced her Transcendent form especially well.

Trapped, the enormous reptile staggered back.

But it was too late.

Because the river of liquid metal that Morgan had become retained the curse of her Flaw. Amplified by her Aspect Power, her flowing shape was cutting into the flesh of the powerful vessel, slicing it apart, and letting torrents of blood flow down onto the rubble.

It was too slow, though.

The shell of liquid metal swirling around the body of the taken Saint rippled, and countless long, appallingly sharp spikes shot from its inner surface into his flesh, riddling it with holes and destroying his every organ.

Just like that, three Transcendent vessels of the Prince of Nothing

were destroyed.

Even knowing that his retaliation would follow a few moments later, Morgan couldn't help but laugh.

Of course, she only laughed inside her mind, since her current form had no mouth and no lungs to produce sound.

'Three down…'

Would that be a big enough gesture to invite Mordret into her soul?

If yes… one of them was going to die in the next few minutes.

Or both of them.

If not, the siege of Bastion would continue on for a long time — the loss of these vessels would slow Mordret's momentum, after all.

Two of the three possible outcomes ended in her victory.

Those... weren't bad odds…

East of the crumbling fortress, a beautiful steel colossus was battling a hideous monster in the shallow water.

West of it, a graceful dragon was fighting a titanic horror of the depths fiercely, his haunting songs traveling across the surging lake.

Inside the fortress, the ancient walls were collapsing, and a man with mirror-like eyes was looking curiously as a river of living metal was slowly painted red.

The shattered moon shone coldly in the broken sky.

Chapter-1991: Hideous Face of War

An enormous Echo stood upon the desolate white plain, shining blindingly as its steel carapace reflected the radiance of the overcast sky. It was powerful enough to flatten fortresses and durable enough to endure Transcendent blows, towering above the sun-bleached bone like a steel behemoth.

The gargantuan beast had four mighty legs, a broad back, and a flat head that rested on a long neck. However, it had not been created by the Nightmare Spell in the image of a fearsome abomination… instead, it had been forged by the King of Swords once — perhaps to serve an important purpose, perhaps simply out of boredom.

Unless one wanted to bully the weak, the giant Echo was not suited well for battle. It was not swift enough to be of use in a serious battle, and while its carapace was durable, it was not nearly resilient enough to survive the many dreadful perils of the Dream Realm. At best, it could serve as a massive siege tower.

At present, however, it served as a mobile redoubt for the command staff of the Sword Army… not because of its power or impregnable carapace, but simply because its height offered the King of Swords and his retinue a convenient vantage point to observe the battlefields.

The Echo's long tail rested on the ground, serving as a bridge that one could use to reach the flat expanse of the creature's back — there were even guardrails installed on both sides of the ascending path to prevent people from falling down.

On the back of the steel beast, the field headquarters of the Sword Army stood, composed of colorful tents and canvas pavilions… most of them black or vermilion, of course. This was where the King and his close aides resided when the army was on the march, and where

the generals gathered to hold council.

This arrangement was not at all as impressive as the Valor Keep in the main camp of the Sword Army, of course, but still far more comfortable and convenient than one would expect in the middle of an active war.

Finally, there was another steep path leading from the back of the enormous Echo and up its long neck. A circular viewing platform was located on the other end of the path, resting atop the head of the steel behemoth. The posts of the decorative guardrail were fashioned to look like a crown, and the white plain of sun-bleached bone could be seen far below in stunning view.

That was where Sunny had found himself on a hot summer day, hiding his grim expression behind Weaver's Mask as he observed the calamitous battlefield.

Well… every day in Godgrave was cruelly hot and sweltering, so this one was no different from all the rest.

He sighed.

'Why is it that every war I participate in happens to take place in an area with extreme weather conditions?'

First the dreadful cold of Antarctica, now the suffocating heat of Godgrave…

It was truly unfortunate.

'The next war I join better happen somewhere with a nice climate.'

The rest of the people gathered on the platform did not seem to share his sentiment. All of them were clad in heavy armor — except for Nephis, who had stuck with her decision to forego it entirely and was wearing simple white garments.

There were no dark corners on the head of the enormous Echo for Sunny to hide in, so he simply found a relatively desolate spot and stood there alone, leaning on the railing with crossed arms. Added to his fearsome mask and cold attitude, this pose dissuaded others from

approaching him, which suited Sunny fine.

Most people crowded around the King, anyway.

Anvil was standing at the foremost point of the viewing platform, observing the battle with a somber expression. His vermilion cloak was moving slightly in the wind, and his iron crown seemed especially heavy today. Sunny could not tell what the Sovereign of the Sword Domain was thinking about, and couldn't even guess what he felt.

No one was speaking at the moment, absorbed by the dreadful view of two great armies clashing on the plain below.

It was truly an awesome scene.

There were hundreds of thousands Awakened warriors participating in the battle, as well as thousands of Masters. There were countless Echoes, as well…

There was also a vast horde of horrid Nightmare Creatures subjugated by Beastmaster, and the eerie legion of the dead risen by the Queen of Worms.

The battlefront stretched from east to west for no less than a dozen kilometers, and terrible forces ravaged the crumbling lines of desperately struggling soldiers. Countless Aspects were being unleashed, and countless Memories were consuming oceans of essence to release a myriad of enchantments. The bone plain was quaking, and the fabric of reality seemed to grow brittle and thin.

The bone plain was drinking blood greedily, and too many lives were being lost each minute.

…It was appalling.

Here on the head of the gargantuan steel beast, it was almost peaceful. The deafening roar of the battle was like a distant murmur of the tide, and none of the devastating forces unleashed on the battlefield reached the viewing platform.

And yet, the people gathered here were not at all at peace.

If there was one thing lacking on the battlefield… it was the Saints. Neither of the two armies had sent their Transcendent champions into battle, so all they could do was watch from a distance and gnash their teeth.

Sunny had imagined the war as many things, but he had never imagined that it would be so… boring.

At the start of it all, he had been worried about having to slay countless humans with his own two hands.

But in truth, Sunny had barely had an opportunity to spill blood after his first few attacks on the supply caravans of the Song Army.

All the killing and all the dying was being done by ordinary soldiers like Rain, and they were the ones paying the hideous price of war.

It was a shameful truth.

Chapter-1992: Mass Destruction

There was a good reason for that, of course.

A shameful and ugly reason, but a good one nevertheless.

Soon after the second stage of the war started, the forces of both Domains had ventured to gain control over vast territories of Godgrave. The Sword Army had held a great advantage in that regard, already holding East Collarbone Plain and a large portion of the Breastbone Reach at the time, while the Song Army had been locked on West Collarbone Plain.

There were expeditions launched to conquer the two remaining Citadels in Godgrave. Revel was leading an expedition into the darkness of the Spine Ocean, and a Saint from the branch family of Valor was leading a competing one to make sure that the Lightslayer died there.

At the same time, Sir Gilead ventured south with a small force of elite warriors to claim the Citadel on the femur of the dead deity — considering that Nameless Temple stood between them and the Song Army, his expedition was unopposed. The Queen of Worms had seemingly decided to choose her battles and gave up on the south completely.

A lot of time had passed since the three conquest parties departed, but neither of the Citadels were conquered yet… which was quite important.

That was because the conquest of the last two Citadels would become the final tally of the authority that the two Domains possessed in Godgrave. And once their authority had no more room to grow, there would be nothing left to hold the Sovereigns back.

And so, the King of Swords and the Queen of Worms would finally

enter the battlefield in person… to face each other, and see which one of them would inherit the throne of War's Divine Realm.

Which one of them would kill the other and get the other's crown.

…That did not mean that there was nothing for the two great armies to do while the conquest parties braved the dreadful depths of Godgrave to claim the Citadels, though. In fact, the ordinary soldiers had to play the most important role in this Realm War.

The authority of a Domain did not only depend on Citadels, after all — as Sunny had found out. There were other factors involved, like the strength and spirit of those people who belonged to the Domain… and its territory.

The latter was especially important, because while the two Domains were roughly equal in terms of population, there was vast unconquered territory in Godgrave. The side that managed to claim more of it could very well swing the final balance of power in its favor.

So… the two great armies had begun the conquest.

The initial process of claiming territory for a Domain was rather simple — Sunny had helped the Sword Army do just that while marching to the Vanishing Lake.

The forces of humanity had to push the scarlet jungle back, burn it, slaughter the Nightmare Creatures who populated it — the original masters of this cursed land — and build fortresses around the fissures in the ancient bone, thus preventing the abominable infestation from extending its tendrils from the Hollows again.

However, what followed next was more complicated, and far more vile.

Because after the forces of humanity wrestled control over the lands of Godgrave from the grasp of Corruption, humans could still fight for that control among themselves.

And that was what had been happening during the second stage of the war.

Both armies continued to claim more territory by banishing the scarlet jungle into the Hollows wherever possible, but they also clashed with each other, fighting for the already conquered land. The extermination outposts had become the currency that both Domains lusted for, and so, humans were now spilling human blood in Godgrave.

The Song Army had eventually made its way to the Breastbone Reach by staging a two-pronged offensive from the Collarbone Plain and the Western First Rib. The battlefront had become twisted and complicated, with some fortresses changing hands several times a week.

…And all of that was being done by the Awakened soldiers and Ascended officers.

The most powerful champions of both great armies, the Saints, mostly remained on the sidelines.

That was because Saints were too powerful, and too rare. Losing even one was a great loss for the Domains, especially if the fallen Saint controlled a Citadel — since there was usually no one left to replace them as its ruler.

Besides that, a single Transcendent could annihilate an uncountable number of soldiers. If they were unleashed on the battlefield, the casualties among the Awakened warriors would be too monstrous.

…Which would never stop either of the armies from using their Saints as weapons of mass destruction, of course. In fact, they would gladly do just that — the more enemy combatants perished, the better.

However, they were deterred from doing so… by the enemy Saints.

The Transcendent champions of the Song Army guarded the Transcendent champions of the Sword Army watchfully, and vice versa.

None of them were allowed to enter the fray unless an enemy Saint launched an attack on the ordinary soldiers, so everyone remained

passive, doing nothing.

Valiant Saints led their warriors to battle, only to stand back and watch as the soldiers fought the enemy alone — all the while the enemy Saints stood on the other side of the battlefield, doing the same.

Of course, there were exceptions to the rule, especially because the Song Army possessed much more Transcendent champions, and the Sword Army had been having a hard time keeping them in check. At the same time, though, the Sword Army possessed Changing Star and the Lord of Shadows, who could not be stopped by just one or two Saints. These exceptions were rare.

So, the weak fought and died while the powerful stood back and watched.

It was a disgraceful affair...

While not at all different from how it was in most other wars, perhaps.

It was also quite strange at times.

At one point, for example, the Saints of Song had decided to stage a clandestine attack in the portion of the Breastbone Reach that Sunny had been assigned to watch over. He had to Shadow Step into the middle of the battlefield, summon the Shadow Chair, and sat down… then watch Silent Stalker and a few other Transcendents shift awkwardly from one foot to another and grind their teeth, unwilling to provoke him and unable to do anything.

Sunny had remained sitting until the battle ended, never moving a muscle.

He had a feeling that things could change today, though.

Because although there had been countless minor battles and skirmishes in the war already, today's battle was different.

It was the first full-scale clash between the two great armies, with most of their soldiers present on the battlefield and participating in

the bloodshed.

The scale of it was both terrible and daunting... there had never been a greater battle in the history of humankind, after all.

Sunny was watching the greatest crime in history be committed right in front of his eyes.

...Well, maybe not. Humans of the waking world, the children of War, had committed plenty of atrocities during the Dark Times, after all, and plenty more before that.

Nothing had really changed since then, except that human soldiers wielded far greater powers now.

In the indescribable chaos of their cataclysmic confrontation, anything could happen.

He doubted that Saints would be forced to remain idle until the bitter end.

Chapter-1993: Attrition

Far below, the battle seemed to be hanging in a fragile balance.

The battle lines were twisted and broken, and in some places, all pretense of order had been lost. Countless Awakened warriors were intertwined in a chaotic melee there, having forgotten all about discipline and battle formations. Blood was spilling on the ground, and a litany of desperate voices was drowning in the deafening clangor of steel.

In other places, stalwart officers were still maintaining a semblance of control. The forces of the Sword Army were pushing the forces of Song on the left flank of the grand formation, while its right flank was being pushed back instead. In the center, a furious tug of war was boiling, with neither side managing to gain ground.

At first glance, the soldiers of the Sword Domain were in a better position.

That had been true throughout the war. The warriors of the Song Domain did not lack courage, determination, or martial prowess… in fact, Sunny had often been stunned by their tenacious resolve. Their powers and tactics were often strange, insidious, and wild, bringing with them a sense of lethal peril.

They were chillingly fearless in the face of death, and viciously ruthless when they needed to be.

And yet, they were simply no match for the soldiers of the Sword Army.

The army of the Sword Domain was better equipped, better trained, and better able to maintain discipline in dire situations. Even if each individual warrior fighting under the banner of the King of Swords was not more powerful than the warriors of Song, together, they

made for a much tougher and deadlier force.

It was partially because Clan Valor and its vassals had been in power for much longer than Clan Song, and therefore possessed a much richer martial tradition. The core of the Sword Army had been forged in the successive subjugation campaigns that brought vast regions of the Dream Realm under human control, after all, and while Ki Song had led a historic conquest of her own, its scope and length did not compare.

It was also because the Awakened of the Sword Domain had always been more militant, and their martial culture had always leaned more in the direction of organized warfare. The Valor family had inherited the lineage of War God, and therefore, the region under its control was influenced in subtle ways to fit that legacy.

…But mostly, it was because of the King of Swords.

His authority was everywhere, enveloping the Sword Army like an invisible veil. The soldiers were not just fighting for his Domain — they were parts of his domain and, therefore, its conduits.

Sunny had noticed the subtle effect of Anvil's authority during that first battle at the eastern edge of the Collarbone Plain. Those who carried it would not magically become stronger or more powerful, but the efficacy of their joint actions would be greater, their cooperation would be more seamless, and their battle spirit would become more indomitable.

It was an authority to make armies triumph.

And that was why the soldiers of Song were desperately outmatched in this war.

Even now, they were suffering on the battlefield.

The waves of Song warriors were breaking against the steel bulwark of the Sword Army forces, paying a heavy price for each assault.

Despite the dire havoc of the battle, their enemy still maintained a high measure of martial discipline — the forward units endured the attacks for as long as they could, then rolled back to make space for

fresh troops. When it was time to push, they marched forward as a single being. When the defensive lines were broken and the warriors of the Sword Domain were pushed back, they promptly received reinforcements.

For every soldier of the Sword Army that fell, two enemies died.

Sunny sighed.

It did not matter, in the end.

The seeming advantage of the Sword Army… was merely an illusion. Anyone with a bit of insight could tell that things were actually going quite badly for their side.

That was because the Queen of Worms was exerting her influence on the battlefield, as well.

And hers was a power no less dreadful than that of the King of Swords.

What did it matter if fewer warriors of the Sword Army were dying? In the end, all of those who were killed — no matter the side — simply rose again, becoming members of the legion of the dead.

That had been true throughout the war, as well.

Yes, the Sword Army was stronger. And yes, it had held the advantage from the beginning, winning many more battles than it was losing, and suffering far fewer casualties than the enemy.

But it was still a road to certain defeat.

As the losses of both sides mounted, only one side was actually becoming weaker… the side Sunny was fighting for. The Song Army, meanwhile, was losing Awakened warriors, but its numbers never truly diminished.

On the contrary, they continued to grow.

Because it did not matter to whom the dead had been loyal once — the Queen of Worms did not discriminate between the fallen of her

own army or that of the enemy, embracing all with equal grace.

It was a chilling sight, to see a comrade with whom you had been fighting side by side a minute ago, and whose death you were mourning, rise from the ground and aim their empty gaze at you, determined to extinguish your own life, in turn.

It was as if the Sword Army was waging war against death itself.

The longer the war continued, the more soldiers the Sword Domain lost, and the greater the army of the Song Domain became. And the wider gap there between the two was, the more casualties the Sword Army suffered as a result, thus creating a harrowing cycle.

Despite its superiority, they were destined to lose this war of attrition.

…The same situation, albeit on a smaller scale, was currently taking place on the battlefield Sunny was observing.

Something had to change soon, or they were going to suffer a bitter defeat… which could very well become irreparable, swinging the balance of power in favor of the Song Domain too much.

He glanced at the King of Swords, wondering what the fearsome Sovereign was thinking about.

Chapter-1994: Call to Arms

The writing was on the wall.

The Sword Army seemed to be prevailing against the enemy, for now, but as its losses mounted and the horde of the dead puppets grew… there was no escaping the eventual defeat.

If Sunny could see it, then Anvil could see it, as well.

And yet, the King of Swords was not doing anything. The only orders he gave were minor commands, like sending reserve units to reinforce the faltering sections of the battlefront or pulling back heavily battered battalions. His tactical prowess was immaculate, true, but that was hardly enough to remedy the situation.

At the moment, the Sovereign was simply watching the carnage silently, his steely eyes not revealing any emotion.

It was as if he was waiting for something, or maybe simply putting too much trust into his domineering authority.

His presence was, indeed, more suffocating than the sweltering heat.

Sunny scowled behind his mask.

'...He's not planning to obliterate both armies, is he?'

Out of the two Sovereigns, only Anvil possessed such an option… thanks to Saint Tyris, who could break the veil of clouds above the battlefield.

But no, that could not be true. Not because Anvil wasn't capable of implementing a monstrous strategy like that, but simply because Sky Tide would never agree to heed such a command.

She had a will of her own, after all, and had disobeyed the Sovereigns

before. More than that, her own daughter was currently down there, somewhere, fighting on the frontline with other warriors of the White Feather clan. Even if Anvil threatened to cut Tyris down, she would simply invite him to try.

So… what then?

As if to answer these thoughts, the King suddenly turned away from the battlefield and looked at something. Sunny was confused for a moment, not knowing what he was looking at, but then realized that the answer was obvious.

Ignoring the people crowding around him, Anvil was gazing at Nephis, who stood some distance away.

He studied her for a few moments, and then asked evenly:

"What do you make of it?"

Sunny's scowl deepened.

Why was that bastard putting Nephis on the spot? Sure, she was technically his adopted daughter… but everyone knew that it was merely a charade to justify a political alliance. Even if it had not been, Anvil wasn't known for treating his children with warmth or attention.

Nephis seemed surprised by the question, as well… of course, to everyone except for Sunny, her expression would have looked just as calm and composed as ever.

She looked up at the King of Swords, remained silent for a few moments, and then shrugged.

"It's appalling."

Something unexpected happened in the next moment.

The King of Swords… smiled.

His smile was faint and cold, but it was undeniably there.

Anvil looked back to the battlefield.

"...I see that you are more like your mother than your father."

His voice was just as emotionless as ever, but there was a hint of something personal in it.

It almost sounded human.

Nephis frowned.

"In what way?"

Anvil did not respond for a few moments.

Eventually, he spoke in a detached tone:

"Your mother… cared about everyone. But your father only cared about himself, and that which was his."

He lingered for a moment, and then added quietly:

"Perhaps that was why she left before the rest of us."

The King of Swords then glanced at Nephis, his heavy gaze crushing into her with almost physical force.

"Since you are appalled by this slaughter, you must care about the soldiers below."

A corner of his mouth rose subtly once again.

"...Or do you simply consider them yours?"

Sunny felt a cold chill run down his spine.

Was that an innocent question? Or was it aimed to test Neph's loyalty to the Sword Domain?

Or…

Was this Anvil showing that he did not trust her at all?

Or was he hoping that he could?

In any case, something told Sunny that many things depended on how Nephis answered.

The rest of the Saints seemed perturbed by the strange conversation between the commander of the Sword Army and its most radiant champion, as well.

Nephis remained silent for a while, the wind playing with her silver hair.

Then, she sighed, stretched her neck with a tired expression, and walked over to the railing of the wide platform.

Jumping over them in one fluid motion, she landed on the steel skin of the enormous Echo and took a few steps to the edge of its head. There, she turned around and looked at the Sovereign calmly.

He raised an eyebrow.

"What are you doing?"

Nephis shrugged.

"I am going down. I grew tired of standing here and doing nothing."

He considered her silently for a few moments.

"Haven't I forbidden my Saints to fight the enemy unless the enemy attacks first?"

Nephis met his heavy gaze expressionlessly.

"You did. You haven't forbidden us from entering the battlefield, though."

Anvil smiled for the third time in a single day.

This time, his smile was a little terrifying.

"And if your arrival provokes the enemy to attack you?"

Nephis just stared at him impassively.

After a few moments of silence, she said in an even tone:

"Then I will break them."

Anvil's chilling smile turned into an equally frightening sneer, but he did not stop her.

Witnessing this, some of the Saints present on the viewing platform moved, as well.

Roan gave his wife a brief look, then headed to the railing.

"I think I would like to stretch my leg, too."

Saint Helie, who had been standing by her lonesome on the opposite side of the platform from Sunny, glanced at Nephis and sighed.

"I am actually afraid of heights. Spending some time on the ground will be quite nice."

Rivalen of Aegis Rose stared at them in confusion.

"Ah, yes. Me too… I mean, I want to stretch my legs too, Your Majesty. Not that I am afraid of heights."

The rest of the Saints had begun moving, as well.

The King of Swords did not spare them a look, continuing to study the battlefield.

Sunny wasn't sure if that was because everything was going according to what the Sovereign had wanted, or if he simply did not mind.

Nephis did not wait for the Sword Saints. Summoning her wings, she leaped off the head of the gargantuan Echo and plummeted toward the battlefield like a falling star.

…Saint Jest, who had appeared next to Sunny at some point, let out a chuckle at the sight and shook his head.

"Young people are so hot-headed these days!"

Then, he looked at Sunny and grinned.

"What about you, Shadow? Are you joining the fun?"

Sunny turned his head and stared at the old man coldly.

When he answered, his arrogant voice carried a hint of displeasure.

"No way. Haven't I told you before?"

He lingered for a moment, and then added evenly:

"I am a pacifist."

With that, Sunny sighed, pushed himself off the railing, and turned into a shadow. The shadow disappeared from view a moment later, heading in the direction of the battlefield with stunning speed.

Jest scoffed and shook his head again.

"This kid… is such a terrible liar…"

Chapter-1995: Grim Reality

Rain had been experiencing this strange feeling as of late…

It was as though she was walking through life while asleep, stuck in a long and lurid nightmare.

The first months of the war had been a dreadful and appalling ordeal, but she had always felt wide awake back then. Ascending the titanic arm of the dead deity, crossing over to the collarbone, establishing a camp in the middle of the abominable jungle, and marching into its depths to claim the Citadel for the Song Domain… those were the horrors she knew and accepted.

What had happened next, however, was not.

Rain was a bit lucky, perhaps, to be a part of the Seventh Legion. After playing an important role in the conquest of the Collarbone Citadel, they had been allowed to rest and recover for quite some time. Even later, the Song Army had held the Seventh Legion back as much as possible, letting other divisions spearhead the offensive on the Breastbone Reach.

It had taken a long time before Rain saw people killing other people, and was forced to spill human blood herself.

She had been dreading that moment for a long time, but when it happened, it happened quickly. It was kill or be killed — the other person would not hesitate to end her life if given the chance…

Only they would, if they were like her. And that was precisely the point — they were like her. The soldiers of the Sword Army were fellow humans, no different from Rain, and the thought of killing another human for no good reason was just as appalling to most of them as it was to her.

They were all Awakened, and therefore no strangers to bloodshed. In fact, they were all natural killers, having experienced the visceral rush of fighting and slaying living beings many times. However, there was a stark difference between killing Nightmare Creatures and killing humans — real humans, not nameless phantoms conjured by the Spell in the illusory Nightmares.

If anything, their experience only made the act of killing harder. Those who routinely faced Nightmare Creatures knew how precious human lives were, after all, because they knew that humanity was surrounded by the enemy — by the abominable other — from all sides.

The soldiers of the two great armies might have been enemies, but they weren't… the other. They were the same.

Still, war... was war.

The first time Rain had to aim at a human, she felt nauseated and afraid. She froze for a moment, unable to let go of the string, and then lowered her bow a little — an action that was somehow both involuntary and completely conscious. As a result, her arrow struck the enemy archer in the thigh instead of piercing his heart.

It had never become easier. There were a few of these moments later on — sometimes, Rain was sure that while her arrows seriously wounded many, they did not kill anyone…

Sometimes, she was not.

But it was all happening so quickly. There was no time to think. Before she could even fathom the implications of her actions, there was a new enemy rushing at their position, and after one battle was over, another would be starting too soon.

Strangely enough — or maybe quite predictably — the aim of the enemy archers was often just as terrible as hers.

Melee fighters like Tamar and Ray did not enjoy the same privilege. And yet, they too did not seem burning with a feverish desire to see the enemy die. In the bloody havoc of battles, they often aimed to

incapacitate their opponents instead of killing them… as often as they could, at least.

But how often could that be?

People were still dying.

The skirmishes in Godgrave were swift and brutal. One army attacked, and the other one defended. Usually, it quickly became apparent which side held the advantage — the other side retreated, unwilling to suffer heavy casualties for an empty cause.

Sometimes, the Ascended officers would try to implement a more ruthless strategy and held the wavering soldiers back… but the officers themselves were human, too.

They were just as appalled by the senseless bloodshed, and just as dismayed by the hideous reality of war.

The more people died, the more discontent the soldiers and the officers became, and the more elusive the initial reason for the war seemed.

In the end, the soldiers on both sides were shaken and disturbed. The army camps, which had been lively once, were now subdued and full of silence. Rain often saw people sitting on the ground and staring into the distance with empty eyes, some still covered in blood from the recent battle.

As an archer, she was usually cleaner than them… but otherwise, she was very much the same.

All of it seemed too ugly and wrong to be real.

And so, she couldn't shake the feeling that reality was merely a nightmare.

It would be quite fitting, actually. Rain had cheated the world by Awakening without undergoing the First Nightmare… so, there was perverse justice in the fact that her life had become a kind of nightmare in turn.

But, of course, she knew that what was happening around her, and to her, was no nightmare.

The war was very real, and the horrors of the war were very real, as well.

There was no escaping that fact, and all she could do was blame herself for coming to this godforsaken hell instead of burying her head in the sand and cowardly running away to hide in Ravenheart.

Rain found some solace in the company of her cohort… Tamar, Ray, and Fleur. The four of them were going through this terrible ordeal together, and searched for ways to survive it in sound mind together. Even in the depths of her dejection, she couldn't imagine abandoning them.

But most of all, what helped her stay sane… was the company and support of her brother.

Her… brother.

It had taken Rain a while to come to terms with the fact that her mysterious and often sinister teacher was not, in fact, some dark deity or errant spirit, but instead her older brother.

And entirely human, on top of that!

A completely improbable, astonishing, and absurd human. How did his existence even make sense? How could he be one of the most powerful Saints in the world, her brother, and Changing Star's boyfriend to boot?

Still… although confounding, his presence by her side was not unwelcome.

It was a source of warmth and strength for her, instead.

And Rain desperately needed both of those things.

Especially today.

Because today, the two great armies had gathered on a vast bone

plain, and the Seventh Legion was thrown into the jaws of a calamitous battle.

Chapter-1996: Fodder

There had been countless skirmishes and several larger battles between the two armies before, but never anything of this scale.

There had never been a battle this great and this terrible in all of human history... at least not in the history of their world.

But then again, this wasn't their world.

The Seventh Legion was in the most dire section of the battlefield — the very middle of the center, serving as the spearhead of the entire Song Army. The enemies they faced were not young Awakened who had become carriers of the Spell in the aftermath of the Chain of Nightmares, either, but the hardened core of the Sword Army instead…

The seasoned veterans of the royal clan's own storied forces. The Knights of Valor.

They were like a steel bulwark that refused to be shaken or pushed back, repelling one fierce attack after another. The Ascended Knights commanded Awakened Squires, maintaining immaculate discipline and the indomitable will of the elite troops.

They were all clad in heavy steel armor and wielded potent Memories as weapons, their vermilion cloaks standing out vividly against the white backdrop of the sun-bleached bone. Powerful Echoes fought in front of the formation — some of them earned as rewards from the Spell, some crafted by the enchanters of Valor.

Rain was concentrating on destroying these Echoes while trying to ignore the terrible cacophony of battle and the screams of dying soldiers that washed over her like a heartbreaking song.

'Damn it, damn it, damn…'

But how could she ignore it?

The shaking ground was slick with blood, broken bodies laying here and there and staring at the blinding sky with empty eyes. Most of them were strangers, but some of them… some of them, she had come to know over the months spent fighting side by side in Godgrave.

That man there… she had seen him survive the deadly embrace of a monstrous tree in the Hollows. He had survived the abominable jungle only to die here, cut down by a human blade.

The woman there — she was quite infamous in the Seventh Legion for the habit of singing her heart out in the baths despite possessing absolutely no musical talent. Rain had never spoken to her, but she had heard the painful singing many times.

The woman would never sing again…

'Damn it!'

Gritting her teeth, terrified out of her mind and immensely angry at the same time, Rain tried to take aim through the tears veiling her eyes and let go of the string.

…Of course, there were not that many bodies littering the ground. Not because very few people had died, but simply because the dead did not stay still for long on this heinous battlefield.

Just as Rain's arrow pierced the neck of a rampaging Echo, the dead singer moved and slowly rose to her feet. Her Memories were gone, and her tunic was painted red by blood, revealing a harrowing wound. Nevertheless, the young woman did not seem bothered by the pain.

She turned her empty gaze to the steady line of heavily armored knights, and headed toward them with calm steps.

All around her, other pilgrims were marching toward the enemy, as well.

And inside the enemy formation, their own fallen were standing up to

attack it from within.

…The Knights of Valor were a ruthless bunch, though. As soon as one of them perished, the body would be dragged back by the soldiers of the rear rows and either destroyed or debilitated before it could rise.

The Sword Army had been learning how to resist the authority of the Queen, as well.

Witnessing the dreadful scene, Rain remained motionless for a few moments, her breath ragged. Her muscles were aching from the strain of drawing the heavy bow, and she was suffering from the unbearable heat. Even with the [Pièce de Résistance] cooling her down, it was too intense and oppressive, sweat rolling down her skin and stinging her eyes.

She felt dirty.

The noise of the battle was deafening, and its sight was horrifying.

Rain was lost for a moment.

Then, her shadow moved, and a familiar voice whispered into her ear:

"Snap out of it!"

She flinched and tried to regain her composure.

"Summon your sword. Things are about…"

Before her teacher… Sunny… was done talking, a loud horn rolled across the stretch of the battlefield where the Seventh Legion was fighting. Rain failed to register what the unexpected sound meant, at first, but then shivered.

'It's the Knights…'

The Knights of Valor were being called to advance.

She was currently standing on a toppled wagon, surrounded by fellow soldiers. Tamar's centuria had participated in an assault on the enemy

formation not too long ago, and then retreated to rest and lick their wounds while other members of the legion continued the frantic attack.

But they weren't that far from the melee.

If the enemy threw all their power into an offensive push…

'Ah…'

Rain dismissed her bow and manifested the Mark of Shadows into a black tachi.

Tamar had already risen from the ground by leaning on her enormous zweihander. Fleur had been treating one of the soldiers, so Ray grabbed her and pushed her back to safety.

The steel wall of fearsome knights suddenly surged forward, making the ground quake.

They suffered a few casualties while toppling the pilgrims, then crashed into the soldiers of the Seventh Legion a few moments later. Instantly, the carnage and mayhem of the battle turned ten times more intense, with all remaining order evaporating in one harrowing moment. A deafening clangor arose, drowning out the sound of human screams.

Before too long, the frontline of the legion was broken and pushed back, and the enemies were upon Tamar and her worn-down warriors.

Rain jumped off the wagon, thinking that they were lucky.

At least the enemies they faced were not the indomitable Knights of Valor, this time. Instead, they seemed to belong to one of the vassal clans… their cloaks were white instead of vermilion, at least, and many had decorated their armor with feathers.

The world shook as countless Aspects were unleashed and raged across the battlefield, and the merciless sky continued to batter the two great armies with radiance and heat.

Gripping her sword, Rain gritted her teeth and followed Tamar to fight the soldiers of the Sword Army.

…Her shadow followed too, of course.

Chapter-1997: Human Cost

The pilgrims were consumed by the tidal wave of steel warriors, only managing to fell the vanguard of unfeeling Echoes. There were more of them on other parts of the battlefield, but here at the epicenter of the calamitous clash between the two great armies, the Knights of Valor were too shrewd and callous to allow the dead to rise en masse.

The indomitable formation of the Sword Army elites surged forward like an iron wave, crashing into the Seventh Legion and shattering its offensive line. However, not long after, the momentum of the Valor forces stalled.

And then, it was exhausted entirely, leaving them in a deadly mire. Their enemy was not to not be trifled with, either — the seven Royal Legions consisted of the best warriors of the Song Domain, and among them, the Seventh Legion was the fiercest.

It only lost to the First Legion, perhaps, which had vanished into the darkness of the Spine Ocean and was not present on the battlefield today.

After suffering the initial blow, the broken formation of the Song warriors did not buckle, and the warriors themselves did not lose themselves to fear. They were not routed — instead, they descended upon the Knights of Valor and their auxiliary forces like a deadly swarm, burning with wicked resolve and primal fury.

These men and women were neither enthralled by the promise of glory nor intoxicated by the raucous hymns of war. However, they weren't willing to taste the bitterness of defeat, either.

…A wide swath of the hellish battlefield turned into an even harsher hell, with thousands of powerful Awakened and hundreds of fearsome Masters clashing in a deadly melee.

The cacophony of deafening thunderclaps, the litany of human screams, and the violent tremors of the bloodied ground fused into a nightmarish choir of destruction, as if the world itself was in the throes of death — or rebirth, maybe. Perhaps it was the dead deity of Godgrave that was being reborn, its ancient bones soaked by human blood.

In any case, the warriors of both the Sword Army and the Song Army seemed to have forgotten themselves, consumed by the dire and macabre necessity of battle. Their previous doubts were washed away by the shock and awe of the harrowing battlefield, and their minds were hollowed by the dreadful, demented noises of the disastrous havoc.

The world had gone insane.

Rain was so afraid that she did not even feel fear anymore. It was as if that part of her that had been responsible for knowing fear overheated and went up in flames, leaving only cold ashes in its wake. Now, all she felt was fury and resentment.

She did not even know what she was furious about, and whom she resented.

In the absence of an answer, Rain could only focus her reeling mind on the enemy in front of her.

Tamar was the first to clash with the warriors of the Sword Army, vaulting over their loose battle line with the help of her Aspect Ability and using the second floating step to abruptly arrest her momentum, twist on one leg, and lunge herself at their backs.

As soon as her foot touched the ground, her brutish zweihander flashed in a wicked horizontal arc, breaking someone's armor and throwing them aside.

She was putting herself in terrible danger, of course, all alone behind the enemy line…

But a moment later, her soldiers collided with the front of the enemy formation.

Attacked from both sides, the Feather Knights momentarily fumbled.

That was all the opportunity Rain and her comrades needed, tearing into them with urgent determination.

Steel rang against steel, and tasted human flesh, as well.

Blood spilled on the pristine white surface of the ancient bone.

Rain raised her tachi and forced her hands to stop trembling.

Somewhere not too far away…

The elites of Clan Valor were struggling to hold against the vicious attack of the Song warriors. Acting with astonishing precision and stalwart poise, they maintained their formation and refused to give ground, which was already drenched in blood.

The enemy would not allow them to retreat, anyway… and there, behind them, the dead were already stirring, ready to rise.

If they were to be saved, they had to carve a bloody path to salvation with their own hands.

And so, they held fast...

However, a few moments later, a swift figure in crimson garments flashed between the soldiers of Song and crashed into the formation of the ironclad knights. It was a beautiful woman who wore no armor, her ebony hair fluttering behind her in the wind.

Her skin was pale like snow, and her eyes were just as cold.

Her scarlet lips were pressed tightly against each other.

She was one of the Blood Sisters who followed Princess Seishan… A Master of the Song Domain.

Wielding a sharp dagger with a wavy blade, she collided with the warriors of the Sword Army and pushed them back. Her thin hand moved with inhuman speed, slicing up the throat of one soldier, blinding another, piercing a third one's chest.

The knights staggered back in a haze of blood, opening a breach in their formation.

The Blood Sister dashed forward, ready to widen the gap…

Only for her kris to be stopped by a sword's blade.

Sid, one of the Fire Keepers who had been sent into battle with the Knights of Valor, pushed the enemy Master back and looked at her with a scowl.

Her dirty-blonde hair was wet with sweat, and her shield Memory was gone, destroyed by a ferocious Echo… which was a real shame, considering that it had been wonderfully modified by the charming guest of their island not too long ago.

As the breach in the formation widened and the soldiers of the two armies descended into a frenzied melee, she sighed and spoke with a hint of regret:

"Elly."

Her voice was somber.

"...You should have stayed away from this war, stupid girl."

The Blood Sister — the former Handmaiden — forced out a defiant smile.

"It's good to see you again, Sid."

With that, she raised her beautiful dagger and prepared to attack.

A moment later, the two former members of the Dreamer Army clashed under the merciless grey sky, aiming to end each other's lives.

Chapter-1998: Old Friends

Sid knew the Handmaiden… the Blood Sister… quite well.

Her name was Felise. The two of them had been at the Academy together, and arrived at the Dark City at the same time.

There were many others that year, as well… although not everyone made it to the Bright Castle alive. Those who had either turned out to be lucky enough to become Guards or were left to rot in the outer settlement.

Sid and Felise were not lucky, but they happened to possess a few soul shards by then, so they paid the tribute and entered the Castle together. Naturally, they stuck close to each other once inside.

Their shards did not last long, though. Eventually, they had nothing left to pay tribute with… that day, Sid decided to leave for the outer settlement, while Felise decided to become a Handmaiden.

Sid did not blame her for that decision. Felise was… a soft girl. The harsh life in the outer settlement would be a death sentence for someone like her, most likely.

Hell, Sid was quite pessimistic about her own chances of survival.

But she did survive, somehow.

Their friendship did not end immediately, either. Felise used to sneak out food for her when she could, in those first few months on the Forgotten Shore. The two hid in a threadbare shack and shared their hopes, their fears, and their scars — both physical and mental.

But it was hard to maintain a connection when separated by the impenetrable walls of the Castle. Eventually, they grew apart. Felise became one of Seishan's people, while Sid became a hunter of the

outer settlement.

And after the war for the Bright Castle and the siege of the Crimson Spire, well… Sid followed Nephis of the Immortal Flame, while Elly followed Seishan of Song. Their paths did not cross again in the many years since.

…Until today.

'Gods…'

Sid had been a passable fighter all the way back on the Forgotten Shore — otherwise, she would not have survived the streets of the Dark City. And in the years since, she only grew more deadly.

The Chained Isles, the Southern Campaign, the Second Nightmare, and the countless battles fought side by side with Changing Star — both across the Sword Domain and here in Godgrave — had tempered and sharpened her already outstanding skill, turning Sid into a unique existence among Ascended.

She had even fought the Lord of Shadows once!

That monster…

And yet, she was being pushed back by Felise.

Her former friend was just too swift, too strong, and too cunning. Her kris was shorter than the arming sword Sid wielded, and yet, it seemed to be everywhere all at once. Worse yet, the moment their blades clashed, Sid felt her hand trembling from the dire force of the impact.

It did not make any sense. Having long saturated her core and armed with Memories that no amount of money could buy, Sid was at the peak of what a Master could be, while Elly's Aspect — its Dormant Ability, at least — was tailored to Utility. How had she become so monstrously powerful?

Staggering back, Sid barely managed to activate her Awakened Ability in time. Her body became intangible for a split second, and the wavy blade of the beautiful kris passed through her forearm

without cutting her tendons.

Sliding back on the bloodied surface of the sun-bleached bone, she regained her balance and raised her sword into a defensive stance, breathing heavily.

It did not make any sense at all…

"...When did you become so strong?"

Her voice came out hoarse and heavy.

Felise gritted her teeth, and then lunged forward with the speed of lightning.

"I... have always been strong..."

Sid used her Aspect to give herself a few moments of tremendous might, and battered the sharp kris aside. There was a deafening boom, and an explosion of fiery sparks.

Her free hand turned into a fist, flying toward the Handmaiden's beautiful face…

…Some distance away, Rain pushed an enemy aside, deflected a downward slash aimed at her head, and slammed the pommel of her tachi into the visor of another Awakened foe's helmet.

Gaining a moment to breathe, she swallowed a mouthful of searing air and looked around.

All around her, the warriors of the Seventh Legion were intertwined in a bloody struggle against the elite forces of the Sword Domain. The Feather Knights had turned out to be tough adversaries, even if they were no match for the true monsters of Valor.

Still, they possessed that eerie quality that all soldiers of the Sword Army possessed… they moved as one, seamlessly weaving a net of sharp steel to defend themselves and cut the enemies down. This strange ability was hard to explain with words, but very easy to become a victim of.

Many were already dead.

…Many dead were already rising from the ground, too.

That sight was both deeply horrifying and shamefully reassuring.

At least the Queen was with them.

Rain shuddered.

Not too far away, a vaguely familiar Blood Sister was fighting against a Knight of Valor, her crimson garments and his vermilion cloak turning into a red blur. The enemy Ascended was bleeding from a dozen hideous wounds, but it only seemed to make him stronger.

Apart from him, there was another dire problem on their section of the battlefield…

It was one of the Feather Knights — a young woman wearing light armor and a white cape, her pauldron and the plume of her helmet adorned with white feathers. Her youthful face was pretty and somber, and her hair seemed to be gold.

From the way she moved and her threatening presence on the battlefield, she gave Rain the same impression most Legacies did.

Sharp, grounded.

Deadly.

Among all the Awakened warriors they were facing, the young woman was the most dangerous, having already killed several of Rain's comrades.

That was why Tamar had fought her way in that direction, and was facing her personally.

'Damn it…'

Their battle was both breathtaking and chilling, since both were at the very pinnacle of what ordinary Awakened strived to be… but mostly chilling, for Rain, because her heart skipped a beat every time

the enemy's sharp blade whistled past Tamar, missing her vitals by a few centimeters at most.

Feeling an ominous premonition, Rain exhaled through gritted teeth and lunged back into the furious melee.

She was trying to make her way to where Tamar and the young Feather Knight were clashing, but it was taking her a long time…

There were too many people fighting, bleeding, and dying between her and the two Legacies. There was too much mayhem.

She could become one of those dying people at any moment, too, falling to the ground in a fountain of blood...

Even if her brother was a powerful Saint, he was not omnipotent. On a battlefield like this one, life and death could be decided in a split second.

And Rain… Rain was wasting too many seconds trying to reach Tamar.

Chapter-1999: Embrace of Shadow

As Rain was struggling to fight her way toward Tamar, Tamar was struggling to contend against her fearsome enemy.

Both she and the young Feather Knight seemed to have fully saturated cores, possessed exceptional combat skill, and were stellar at controlling their essence — at least to the degree Awakened could. As a result, their physical prowess was truly superhuman, and their clash seemed like a whirlwind of steel that rolled across the battlefield, colliding with other warriors to consume them from time to time.

However, Rain could still make out the details of the fight, and while the power of the two Legacies were roughly equal, Tamar was obviously at a disadvantage due to being younger and less experienced.

At first glance, it looked like she was actually pushing the Feather Knight back… however, Rain could not fail to notice that Tamar's adversary had not used her Aspect yet.

Either it had nothing to do with combat, or she was waiting for the right time to unleash her Abilities. The battle promised to be long and exhausting, after all, and powerful Aspect Abilities consumed a lot of essence — any Awakened soldier knew to ration their essence in a fight.

Augmenting one's body, using one's Awakened Ability, and activating the enchantments of one's Memories — those were the things that they only resorted to when necessary during prolonged battles.

If given a choice.

…And while the young knight seemed to still have the luxury of the choice, Tamar did not, already exhibiting bursts of startling speed as often as she could. That was the only reason she was managing to keep up, for now.

Rain had hoped that their clash would take the two Legacies closer to her, but they only seemed to be moving further away.

'Damn it!'

She did not know what to do.

A small, cowardly part of her whispered… that she did not have to do anything, either. Trying to help Tamar was putting Rain herself at risk. Tamar was so very proud of herself and her family — their history, their martial excellence, their tradition. Surely, a proud Legacy like her could fend for herself. Why did Rain have to risk her own life for an entitled Legacy?

She had to concentrate on protecting herself, instead. Surviving on this battlefield was already difficult enough — doing so while rushing to reach a deadly enemy was no different from inviting her own demise.

Stuck in the mass of sharp steel and fighting Awakened, she gritted her teeth and looked down, at her shadow.

Then, she forced out a stifled plea:

"I… I need help!"

Rain rarely asked her teacher for help. Her teacher was a mysterious and lofty existence, after all.

But her brother…

If she couldn't ask her older brother for help in a moment of desperation, then whom else could she ask?

A moment later, his soothing voice reached her ears through the cacophony of battle:

"There is something I can do. But... it is a bit unusual."

Rain clashed with a warrior of the Sword Army, deflecting his blade aside and delivering a devastating downward slash to his shoulder.

His steel armor prevented the black tachi from cutting deep, but the force of the blow threw the man to the ground.

Rain kicked him for good measure and shouted, not caring if anyone heard her:

"Do it! Do it now!"

In the next moment…

Something strange happened.

Hidden by the havoc of battle and unnoticed by anyone except for her, a second shadow separated from her own for a split second.

Then, the second shadow flowed up her leather boot… and wrapped itself around her.

Rain's eyes widened.

'W—what the…'

Once the shadow embraced her, a wondrous change took place.

Her body, which was aching from strain and fatigue a moment ago, was suddenly flooded with enormous power. Every fiber of her being felt energized and revitalized, her muscles brimming with potency and might. Her strength, her speed, her endurance… it felt as if they had magically increased twofold, or even more.

Her perception sharpened, making it easier to discern the details of what was happening around her.

Even her black tachi felt more deadly in her hand.

At the same time, she inexplicably felt calmer. There was… a subtle, but vast presence in her mind — unfamiliar, but not foreign. The

opposite of foreign, really.

That faint, dark presence was deep and reassuring, making her feel… secure.

[Better?]

Rain heard her brother's voice again. Only this time, it did not come from her shadow — instead, it resounded directly in her mind.

She froze for a moment.

[...Quite.]

That was indeed better.

Much better.

'Who even needs an Aspect?'

Gripping the hilt of her tachi, Rain took a deep breath, and launched herself forward.

Suddenly, the sea of Awakened in front of her was not as impenetrable anymore. Armed with her skill and embraced by the shadow, Rain cut through it with violent speed. Her sword turned into a dark blur as it parried and pushed enemy blades away, and when it was not enough, she used her own nimble body to either slip past them or toss them aside.

Perhaps that was what being an Ascended felt like…

Throwing one glance at the harrowing battle between the Blood Sister and the Knight of Valor, Rain shuddered.

No… she was not ready to face Masters yet.

In fact, she was probably still much weaker than Awakened with powerful combat Aspects that augmented their bodies were… granted, the embrace of the shadow was much more versatile than most such Aspects, enhancing all her physical traits instead of one or two.

It was enough.

The distance between Rain and Tamar finally started to shrink, and the more she grew used to her newfound power, the quicker it shrank.

'Hold on, Tamar!'

Rain finally felt that her ominous premonition was nothing more than a false sense of anxiety.

She was almost there. She had almost made it.

…But in the end, she did not.

Rain was less than a dozen meters away from the two fighting Legacies when the cadence of their clash changed.

The young Feather Knight did something that made Tamar sway, and then swiftly disengaged.

Her eyes suddenly shone like two cold stars, and blue arcs of electricity danced across her steel armor.

Before Rain could even react, she pointed her sword forward.

Then, an incinerating bolt of lighting shot from its tip, reaching Tamar in an instant and swallowing her figure in a flash of blue radiance.

Chapter-2000: Human Beasts

Tamar was enveloped by blinding blue radiance for a moment, and then thrown violently to the ground. Her zweihander fell out of her hand, rattling as it slid across the surface of the bloodsoaked bone. Her armor was scorched and melted in several places, revealing patches of gruesomely burned skin.

Wisps of smoke rose from beneath it, dissipating in the air.

Rain froze for a heartbeat, her mind numb.

'N—no...'

Then, Tamar moved weakly, revealing that she was still alive.

What had hit her was no different from true lightning, more than capable of turning a human body to ash. However, the young Legacy must have possessed a Memory that granted her a high enough level of resistance to elemental attacks.

That was how she had survived.

Nevertheless…

She was still wounded and sprawled helplessly on the ground, temporarily unable to defend herself.

And her adversary was unscathed, still holding a sword in her hand.

Blue arcs of electricity were still dancing across her armor.

[Move!]

Her brother's voice shook Rain awake from her stupor.

The young Feather Knight took a step forward, raising her sword

with an unsteady hand. Her face was pale — perhaps because she was unused to killing people, or perhaps simply because it was illuminated by the blue shine of her fearsome Aspect.

A moment later, Rain jumped over Tamar and lunged at the young woman, prepared to strike.

Of course, she had not forgotten to pour essence into the Pièce de Résistance, and limit the scope of its defense to only electricity — thus raising her protection against it as high as possible.

The young Feather Knight flinched and shifted her gaze to the new enemy.

Her sword moved, and another bolt of lightning crackled as it shot at Rain.

Its speed was too dire to dodge, or even react. Rain only knew that she had been hit a moment later, when her vision drowned in a sea of white, and terrible pain pierced her entire body.

…But it wasn't that bad.

She was blinded and in pain, but had suffered little actual harm. It seemed that the protective Memory her brother had crafted for her was quite superior to what Tamar, an actual Legacy, possessed.

She was surprisingly unhurt.

The pain was truly terrible, though, and the electrical charge messed up her control over her body quite badly.

'Ah… hell…'

Rain was blinded, but she still possessed the ability to sense the shadows. She had been trained to navigate the world with this sense, as well.

It would have to do until she regained her vision.

She still had to deal with the Feather Knight.

A moment later, she batted the young woman's sword away and rammed her shoulder into the enemy's chest, sending both of them flying away from Tamar and tumbling to the ground.

Rain was disoriented, but she still jumped to her feet first and slashed down with her sword, feeling a terrifying sense of urgency.

She was wary of her adversary.

Her movements were fluid and terrifyingly swift, but the young Feather Knight still managed to block the black tachi. She was still on her knees and a little dazed, using both hands to receive Rain's blow on the blade of her sword.

Rain could vaguely see that her enemy's helmet had flown off, and her golden hair was fluttering in the wind. The image was vague and blurry, though, making it hard to discern any details.

As soon as the two blades collided, Rain let out a shocked hiss and staggered away.

'What a… cunning wench…'

Her golden-haired foe had used her Aspect power in an insidious way. Instead of channeling it into a bolt of lightning, she simply channeled it into her steel sword. From there, it traveled through the blade of Rain's own tachi and into her body, bringing with it even more pain.

"Aargh!"

Rain's momentary fumble gave the pretty Feather Knight all the time she needed to rise.

The next moment, though, she had to duck with a startled expression as Rain unceremoniously tossed the tachi at her face.

By the time the enemy reacted, Rain was already upon her, grabbing her sword with one hand and delivering a devastating punch to her chest with another.

Rain's hands were protected by the gloves made from black, lusterless

leather. Leather was a far better insulator than the blade of the black tachi, so all she felt from touching the enemy's sword and breastplate was a little sting.

Her current strength, at the same time, was dreadful enough to make the steel of the young Feather Knight cave in a little, and for a stifled scream to escape from her mouth.

…But not enough to make the young Legacy lose her edge, apparently.

In the next second, the Feather Knight's knee slammed into Rain's side, and her fists sent her reeling back in agony — one rammed into her ribs, the other slammed into her chin, making Rain taste blood.

'Why did she have to be proficient in hand-to-hand combat, as well…'

She staggered back, then instantly spun and dove down, sweeping her enemy's feet.

Not giving the golden-haired knight an opportunity to rise, Rain pressed her into the ground and punched her in the face, causing bright blood to shoot from the young woman's nose.

A moment later, the two of them were wrestling on the blood-soaked ground, trying to crush, break, and strangle each other. The white feathers on the young Legacy's armor were soon marred and turned red, and Rain's armor was no better.

Rain was stronger... but the young Feather Knight was still covered in a blue net of electric arcs, which continuously hurt and numbed the adversary.

By then, Rain's vision had almost returned, revealing the dirty, bloodied, pitiful face of her enemy. The fear and desperation in her eyes… and frightening killing intent burning in them, as well.

For a moment, Rain felt disconnected from her own mind and body.

At that moment, the two of them did not seem like warriors… or even humans, really. There was no grace, skill, or honor in their violent and ugly struggle.

Instead, they were no different from dirty, wild beasts tearing at each other in a murderous frenzy.

Still, one of them would have to die, and the other one was going to live.

That... was the essence of combat.

Rain had no time or luxury to hesitate, think, or even feel.

She could only strive to assure that, at the end, she was the one who survived.

Chapter-2001: Winding Paths

The battle between Sid and Felise was like a small calamity… one taking place within the terror of a much vaster cataclysm.

The battlefield where hundreds of thousands of Awakened sought to destroy each other stretched from one horizon to another, strained by the great and violent forces they summoned into the world. Above them was the shroud of radiant clouds; beneath them were the bones of a dead deity.

Sid and Felise had come a long way since the Forgotten Shore. Today, however, their winding paths crossed once again… only for one path to put an end to the other.

Sid tasted blood in her mouth as Felise pushed her back. They moved with enough speed to make their furious clash appear like a blur — from time to time, groups of fighting Awakened soldiers got in their way, only to be violently tossed aside.

Some survived… some were less fortunate.

'Curse it!'

She drew on all her combat experience — few in the world had more of that than her — and all her skill. Her sword moved as if it was a living thing, deflecting blow after blow after blow. There was no holding back in this battle, so Sid abandoned all restraint, alternating between short bursts of incredible power, incredible resilience, and incredible speed — her Dormant, Awakened, and Ascended Abilities.

Still, all of it was not enough to resist Felise, who was like a crimson wraith.

Her former friend was viciously strong and shockingly fast. Her kris was like a curse, seemingly existing in several places at the same

time. Her technique was insidious and flawless, and her killing intent was absolute.

Sid managed to block a blow that would have blinded her by calling upon her strength. She avoided another by leaping back with lightning speed. The third penetrated a crack in her armor, but merely scraped against her adamantine skin, failing to pierce it.

A moment later, Felise delivered a crushing kick to her abdomen, making Sid groan in pain.

She staggered back.

"Elly… if you don't stop… I'm going to get serious…"

The Handmaiden sneered.

"We are not children anymore, Sid. Stop pretending."

Sid grinned, her teeth painted red by blood.

It was true… they weren't children anymore.

Felise had grown incredibly powerful. The soft girl she had known once was gone. Instead, a proud and deadly warrior now stood in front of her — someone who had reached the very pinnacle of what mortals strived for.

A Blood Sister of the Song Domain.

But…

Sid gritted her teeth and straightened, grasping the hilt of her sword with both hands.

Back there on the Forgotten Shore, life had not been easy for the Handmaidens. Most people of the outer settlement imagined the Bright Castle as some kind of heaven, but Sid knew better — in reality, people living there had to contend with their own nightmares.

Felise would not have survived there if she had been weak.

But still…

She had not been a huntress of the outer settlement.

Lunging forward, Sid activated her Ascended Ability and flashed across the blood-soaked bone.

So what if Felise was stronger? So what if she was faster? So what if she was more powerful in all regards?

Sid had made a living from slaying creatures that were much more powerful than her.

Batting the swift kris aside, she collided with the Handmaiden violently and grappled her, letting go of the sword.

If one had no space to move, speed did not matter much.

She pushed Felise back, placing one foot behind hers and tripping her.

If one had no steady footing, it was hard to exert strength. Every action had an equal and opposite reaction, after all, and with no ground to push against, the mightiest of creatures would be limited at what it could do.

For every power, there was a weakness.

There was a flaw.

As they both toppled and fell, Felise clawed at Sid's face, leaving deep cuts on it. Sid tilted her head and bit down on the Handmaiden's hand, feeling brittle bones break under her teeth.

Hunters were people who killed beasts. However…

Before that, hunters themselves were beasts.

They were just more cunning, ferocious, and lethal beasts than their prey.

Felise let out a stifled shriek, failing to thrust her kris into Sid's side.

A moment later, they hit the ground, and Sid smashed her forehead into the bridge of the Handmaiden's nose with all her might.

Felise was blinded by the pain, and a split second later, the back of her head slammed into the tough surface of the ancient bone with terrible force.

Her beautiful ebony hair became soaked with blood.

Wrestling the kris from her momentary weak hand, Sid grasped its hilt, prepared to drive its tip into the enemy's flesh.

However, then… she hesitated.

Even knowing that Felise could dismiss the enchanted dagger at any moment, she still couldn't bring herself to deliver a fatal blow.

'How stupid...'

Her hand wouldn't move.

So, instead, she plunged the kris into the Handmaidens side, delivering her a debilitating wound… but not a deadly one.

Felise let out a pained yelp and struggled desperately, trying to shake Sid off.

She dismissed the kris… but by then, Sid's own dagger had already manifested in her free hand.

It wasn't easy to hold the terrifyingly powerful Handmaiden down. Blood was streaming down Sid's torn face, and her former friend's hands were exploring it, searching for her eyes to gouge them out.

Their desperate struggle was both violent and strangely intimate, as if they were transported back to the Forgotten Shore.

Sitting side by side in a cold ramshackle hut, sharing their warmth, and telling each other stories.

Pressing the tip of her dagger against the enemy's abdomen, Sid growled hoarsely:

"Stay down!"

But Felise only struggled more desperately, unwilling to admit defeat. There were sparks of light swirling around her, soon to manifest into another Memory.

Sid's eyes were burning.

It was either sweat that had gotten into them, or blood.

Or tears.

She allowed her dagger to move down a few centimeters, drawing blood, and said in a stifled, almost pleading tone:

"Stay down, Elly… just stay down. Or I'll kill you…"

'Please, gods…'

But Felise still struggled.

The sparks of light danced, slowly manifesting into a weapon.

Chapter-2002: Kill or Be Killed

Rain tried to batter the Feather Knight into submission, but the young woman turned out to be much more stubborn and resilient than she had expected. Despite the barrage of crushing blows, her enemy continued to resist, not losing even a little bit of determination.

Well… Rain couldn't blame her.

The blond-haired girl was fighting for her life, after all.

Giving up meant death.

'Damn it…'

Her enemy was quite proficient in hand-to-hand combat, as well… more so than Rain was, sadly. After all, Rain had spent the past four years hunting down Nightmare Creatures, not wrestling humans. Her training was thorough, but mostly theoretical.

The Feather Knight, on the other hand, seemed to possess a wealth of practical experience. She protected herself from being hurt too badly while delivering terrible punishment to Rain.

And there were the stinging arcs of electricity, as well…

Pain. Rain was in so much pain.

She was also afraid, frantic, and desperate…

After all, she was fighting for her life, too.

The Feather Knight managed to roll, pressing Rain into the ground. She swatted away Rain's arms and delivered a crushing blow, bruising — or maybe cracking — her ribs with an armored fist.

There was more agony.

Rain tried to use her legs to throw the blond-haired menace off, but her enemy simply went with the motion, spinning around her and catching her neck in an iron chokehold.

Suddenly, Rain couldn't breathe.

She struggled desperately, trying to pull the Feather Knight's arm off her throat. But it was useless. The enemy just groaned and pulled even harder, trying to crush her windpipe.

Even though Rain was stronger, she couldn't get a good grip. She was caught and immobilized.

All her strength was useless.

'I…'

Her vision started to blur.

'I can't die here…'

Shaken and dazed, she had forgotten all about the battle, the war, and the fact that her brother would not let her die.

All she knew was the desperate need to inhale... to survive.

She wanted to stab her killer with one of her enchanted arrows, but summoning a Memory would take too long… wouldn't it?

Luckily, Rain's weapon was not a Memory.

A few steps away, her black tachi was laying on the bloody surface of the ancient bone. As she called for it, the tachi stirred, and then dissolved, turning into a small shadow.

The shadow slithered across the ground like a little snake, and then climbed onto her outstretched hand.

A moment later, it turned into a black dagger with a long, narrow blade.

Twisting her body, Rain mustered all her remaining strength and

drove the stiletto into the Feather Knight's thigh.

The young woman screamed as blood flowed onto the ancient bone.

Her hold grew weaker for a split second, and Rain used that short moment to free herself.

Spinning around, she tore the dagger from her enemy's flesh, and raised it to plunge the dark blade into the Feather Knight's throat.

And then, at the last second... Rain hesitated.

It was because she saw her enemy's face clearly.

The Feather Knight was young — older than her, but not by that much. Under the grime of the battlefield, her face was pale and pretty. Her beautiful golden hair was now mottled, soaked in sweat and blood.

Her eyes were opened wide, full of pain, fear, and despair.

Just like Rain's own.

Was that whom she was supposed to kill?

Of course, it was.

It was war, after all.

It was kill or be killed.

Rain was a hunter, a warrior, and a soldier. She was a soldier of the great Song Army, and the nameless Feather Knight was a soldier of the Sword Domain. She was Rain's enemy, and she would kill Rain immediately if their roles were reversed.

…Would she not?

This moment of hesitation could cost Rain her life if it went on any longer. The enemy was strong, determined, and deadly. She had to die.

So why…

Why did Rain feel so much disgust at the thought of killing this pale, frightened young woman?

Why did she feel reluctant to thrust the dagger forward and take the Feather's Knight's life?

Why…

***

"Stay down, Elly!"

Sid pressed Felise into the ground, knowing that she was being foolish.

She should have finished the Handmaiden down ages ago.

She was being reckless and risking her life, allowing emotions to cloud her mind.

And yet, and yet…

"Stop struggling, you stupid girl!"

Sid growled.

Felise looked up at her from the ground. Her eyes were full of a strange emotion… was it resentment? Defiance? Challenge?

Maybe all of those.

But there was something else there, as well, hidden deep within.

Fear… panic. And despair.

However, despite it all, Felise did not stop struggling.

The sparks swirling around her hand finally dimmed, manifesting into an intricately crafted, razor-sharp knife.

A deadly blade.

Sid froze for a split second, staring down at her former friend

numbly.

There was no time to hesitate anymore, and no choice.

'No…'

…And then, she pushed her dagger down.

It cut through the fabric of the Handmaiden's crimson garment, and plunged into her flesh.

Sneaking under her ribs, and cutting deep.

Hot blood washed over Sid's hand, and she felt Elly's body shudder under her.

The knife fell from the Handmaiden's weakened grip.

The defiance in her eyes was replaced by disbelief... and pain.

And sorrow.

The same emotions Sid felt, lost in the middle of this calamitous, appalling battle.

***

Rain looked into the eyes of the Feather Knight, knowing that her time was running out.

The enemy was already recovering from shock… which meant that a moment later, her chance of killing the enemy would disappear like a ghost.

It would be so easy, to thrust the dagger forward and steal the young woman's life.

There was no reason not to.

Because Rain was a soldier.

And she had been taught well.

The essence of combat…

But was that what Rain wanted to be?

A murderer?

Before the war… she had wanted to build things, not destroy them. To add to the world, not take away from it.

It seemed so distant, as if it had happened a lifetime ago.

Still, one had to be alive to build anything. And she had to kill to stay alive.

There was no time to hesitate, and no choice.

That was just basic logic.

…And yet, Rain found herself unwilling.

She was dazed, hurting, and only starting to recover from almost being strangled to death. She could barely think, let alone think straight, which wasn't the best state to make profound decisions.

But then again, maybe it was the best state.

Stripped of all reason, Rain was left face-to-face with her deepest, most fundamental instincts.

With the things that made her… her.

And what Rain found was that she didn't want to be a murderer, a killer, and a destroyer.

She only felt disgust at the prospect.

Even if it meant not getting to become anything else.

'I'm sorry…'

She had chosen to join the war herself. But in the end…

It seemed that Rain wasn't cut out to be a soldier.

Letting out a quiet sigh, she slowly lowered her dagger.

And as she did, Rain felt something deep and profound change inside of her.

Forever.

A moment later, the Feather Knight lunged to the side, grasping the hilt of her sword.

Before she could raise it, though…

Both of them looked up.

There, above them… a blinding star seemed to be falling from the sky.

The incandescent mass of white radiance plummeted toward the blood-soaked battlefield and crushed into it with a deafening thunderclap. A violent shockwave was raised by its arrival, throwing the warriors of the two great armies away from each other.

When the winds settled a few moments later, Rain gasped.

…A beautiful goddess was standing amidst the dirt and blood of the appalling battlefield, her pure white radiance seemingly unblemished… incapable of being blemished... by the crimson dust of the mortal world.

Two breathtaking wings shone in the air behind her, and a band of lustrous metal rested on her head like a crown.

Her eyes were like a sea of white flame.

Changing Star of the Immortal Flame had descended onto the battlefield.

Chapter-2003: Morning Star

When Changing Star appeared, Rain let out a heavy sigh of relief. All tension left her body, and she slumped on the ground, kneeling in the middle of the battlefield with her back bent.

It was a strange reaction to have, really… by all logic, she should have been terrified. After all, an enemy Saint had arrived at the battlefield — and one of the most powerful Saints in the world, at that.

If not the most powerful.

Sure, Rain knew Nephis, and they shared a distant connection. The last daughter of the Immortal Flame could even spare her out of sentiment if they were to face each other on the battlefield... however, that would require Nephis to remember and recognize Rain first.

Considering that Awakened soldiers were no more than ants in front of Changing Star, she was unlikely to study the faces of each and every one of them before burning the entire anthill to the ground.

…And yet, against all logic, Rain still felt a profound sense of relief at the sight of the beautiful Saint.

Somehow, she believed that her not-quite-sister-in-law would solve everything.

'Right… she's his girlfriend, as well…'

Finally able to think, Rain belatedly remembered about the existence of her teacher.

She hesitated for a moment.

[Brother?]

His reassuring voice soon resounded in her mind, soothing it.

[Relax. It's all going to be alright now.]

There was a short pause, and then he added in a more casual tone:

[Get ready to move, though. You'll have to escape fast once the real mess begins.]

It was only then that Rain tore her gaze from the sacred visage of Nephis of the Immortal Flame and looked around.

Tamar was still laying on the ground, heavily wounded and moving weakly.

The Feather Knight was still just a couple of steps away, tightly grasping her sword…

Luckily, the golden-haired girl did not seem in the mood to attack Rain at the moment. She was also looking at Changing Star with wide eyes.

…Everyone was, really.

Her shocking arrival had magically made the entire battle stop — on a vast span of the battlefield, at least. Soldiers were still clashing on the distant flanks of the battlefront, but in the center, nobody was moving.

It was as if her pure radiance possessed the same power as the dreadful white abyss hiding above the clouds — the power to make entire armies halt.

Rain turned back to Nephis just in time to see the soft light emanating from her skin grow brighter and more intense, almost blinding. Her wings dissolved into a stream of light, and in the next moment…

Everything around was suddenly enveloped by white flames.

The battlefield burned.

…But, strangely enough, no one was hurt by the ocean of radiant fire.

Rain watched in a trance as the bodies of the warriors of the Sword Army were swallowed by it, washed over by it… and restored by it.

The blood stopped flowing. The groans of agony fell silent. The terrible wounds closed, not leaving even a scar.

Thousands of warriors were miraculously brought back from the jaws of death, right in front of Rain's eyes. Cleansed by the Immortal Flame, they rose shakily to their feet, picked up their weapons…

And cast their gazes on the pilgrims of the Raven Queen, who looked like a mockery of all that was holy and of life itself in that moment.

However, Rain noticed something strange, as well.

She witnessed the wounds of the young Feather Knight being healed by the white flame — the gaping wound in her thigh disappearing, the bruises on her face fading, the pain draining from her beautiful eyes, replaced instead by awe and wonder…

But, oddly enough, the very same thing had happened to Tamar. The white flame embraced her, as well, washing away her terrible burns. When the radiance of the fire dimmed, her supple tan skin was smooth and pristine, unblemished.

In fact, there were quite a few warriors of the Song Army who had been saved by Changing Star's grace — not nearly as many as the Sword Army soldiers, but still a significant number.

It was… a bittersweet blessing.

Because there were so many people — on both sides — who had never received the chance to be saved.

The sun-bleached bone was awash in blood, and countless mangled bodies littered its crimson expanse.

More of them were standing motionlessly and watching Changing Star with hollow eyes, their bloodied faces devoid of any emotion.

She did not cower under the gazes of the dead.

Instead, she turned her head, and then walked calmly toward a figure kneeling on the ground a dozen or so meters away.

It was close enough for Rain to see that the figure was a woman with dirty-blonde hair — an Ascended champion of the Sword Army — who was holding a dying Blood Sister in her arms, still gripping the dagger that had delivered the fatal wound in a bloody hand.

From the distance, it almost seemed like there were tears streaming down her face, mixing with blood and dirt.

As the beautiful Saint approached, the Ascended looked up at her with a pitiful face.

Her hoarse, strained voice was like a whisper.

"Lady Nephis…"

Changing Star smiled softly.

"It's alright."

With that, she kneeled in front of them and gently placed her hands on the Blood Sister's abdomen. Her radiance spread outward, flowing into the deep wound of the enemy champion.

A few moments later, the wound began to close.

Rain was so confused...

It did not make any sense.

Why would she heal her enemies?

The soldiers around her all seemed stunned, as well.

The white radiance reflected in their eyes, filling them with wondrous light.

Finally, the Blood Sister stirred weakly, moving her hands to rest them where the fatal cut had been just a few moments ago. Letting out a sigh, Changing Star lingered for several seconds, then rose to her feet and looked down at the kneeling Ascended of the Sword Army.

Raising her brow, she asked:

"What are you waiting for? Fall back."

Then, looking around, she raised her voice and gave the order to every soldier of the Sword Army that was still alive.

"All of you, fall back! Leave the rest to me."

Rain just stared in disbelief.

The battle was over... would be over, just like that?

She shifted her gaze and glanced at the Feather Knight, who had been listening to Nephis with rapt attention.

Now, relief was written on the young woman's face, as well.

The golden-haired girl exhaled slowly, then strained to rise to her feet. Turning around, she took the first unsteady step away.

Their gazes met for a moment.

The Feather Knight lingered, looking at Rain somberly.

Then, she nodded slightly, placed the blade of her sword on her shoulder, and continued walking.

All around, the Sword Army was receding like a sea.

Leaving only Changing Star behind.

Dazed and struggling to contain her excitement, Rain crawled to where Tamar was still laying on the ground and helped the young Legacy sit.

Making sure that Tamar was okay, she looked around once more.

The soldiers of the Sword Army were leaving, but her fellow warriors of Song still remained motionless, looking at Nephis with an array of different expressions.

Some seemed grateful. Some were amazed.

Most, however, were shaking and slowly backing off in terror.

Because now that the initial amazement was gone, they realized that they were left face-to-face with a wrathful demigod… alone.

Or so it seemed.

Rain did not notice when it happened, but at some point, the rows of soldiers parted, and a graceful figure appeared from behind them.

It was Princess Seishan, walking across the blood-soaked battlefield with light steps.

Suddenly, the air grew heavy, as if two enormous wills were clashing all around them, unseen by human eyes.

'Crap…'

Rain gripped Tamar's shoulders tighter, unsure what to do.

The Lost Princess, meanwhile, reached Nephis and stopped a dozen meters away from her, an enchanting smile playing on her crimson lips.

"Lady Nephis... what a pleasure. I did not expect to meet you today."

Her gaze shifted downward, falling on the Blood Sister laying at Changing Star's feet.

Princess Seishan's gaze changed subtly, for a moment, betraying a deep emotion. However, she managed to contain it swiftly, preventing anything from reflecting on her face.

She lingered a little, and then continued:

"...Still, I must express my gratitude. Thank you for saving one of my

Handmaidens. It was… gracious of you, to show my soldier mercy."

Nephis simply looked at her, white flames dancing in her eyes.

After a few moments of silence, she said:

"She was my soldier once, too."

Seishan smiled.

"Indeed. However, Lady Nephis, please satiate my curiosity. I can't help but wonder… why are you standing here, on the battlefield?"

Changing Star stared at her coldly for a bit.

Then, a corner of her mouth lifted slightly, and she answered with a hint of bittersweet amusement in her tone:

"...Because I want to."

Seishan seemed quite surprised by the answer — enough so that a melodious chuckle escaped from her lips.

Nephis inhaled deeply, then looked the princess of Song right in the eyes.

"Let us decide the outcome of this battle with our own hands. You and I… and all the other Saints, if they dare. Why should our soldiers continue to die in our place?"

Seishan tilted her head lightly and remained silent for a while.

Eventually, she said in a calm tone:

"That does sound like an attractive proposition, I admit. However, Lady Nephis… both you and I are forbidden from participating in this battle, are we not?"

Changing Star studied the Lost Princess of Song for a while, then smiled faintly.

"We are not allowed to enter battle, that is true. But if I do decide to enter it…"

She raised her head slightly, and her incandescent eyes suddenly flashed with dancing white flames.

"...Who will stop me?"

Chapter-2004: Seeds of Rebellion

Sunny was not having the greatest of days.

In fact, he was in quite a grim mood.

Not only was he forced to watch the senseless and wasteful deaths of too many Awakened warriors — who were supposed to be the blade mankind wielded against the Nightmare Spell, not against itself — but his own sister was hopelessly mired in the very epicenter of the slaughter, as well, a hair's breadth away from being killed herself.

Sunny had promised himself not to trample her agency unless there was no other choice. So, he could not simply pull Rain into the shadows and whisk her away to safety… whatever safety looked like, in this godforsaken place. All he could do was remain as alert as possible, ready to interfere at a moment's notice to save her life.

This constant state of alarm and tension was taking its toll.

More than that, he was having the worst luck today.

Why did Rain and the members of her cohort have to clash with the warriors of the White Feather clan, of all people? Worse still, Rain just had to go and encounter Telle of White Feather.

From the moment their brutal duel started, Sunny had to focus his full attention on the two young Awakened. Obviously, he couldn't allow Rain to die… but now, he couldn't allow her enemy to die, either.

Despite having first met Telle many years ago, on the Chained Isles, Sunny did not know her well. Still, he had a good impression of her. Much more importantly, her parents were none other than Tyris and

Roan — their daughter could absolutely not be killed on his watch, let alone with his assistance.

So, he waited, getting ready to stop Rain at the last moment — should she win.

Or stop Telle should she lose.

Needless to say, watching them trying to kill each other with all their might was quite nerve-wracking.

In the end, however, Sunny had not been forced to do anything.

Strangely enough, Rain never tried to deliver the fatal blow. He felt a complicated storm of emotions in her just before that, and then a brief moment of striking, unrelenting clarity.

And something else, as well. Something deep and vast, almost… inexorable. But hidden from his senses at the same time.

Both her inexplicable lack of action and this strange emotion confused Sunny to no end. He struggled to understand what could have stopped Rain from at least trying to finish off the deadly enemy… he would have definitely used the precious opportunity himself, and he had taught her better than to lose composure in the middle of a lethal fight.

There was no time to focus on Rain's emotions, though, because almost at the same time, Nephis plummeted from the sky and landed in the middle of the calamitous battlefield like a falling star.

Sunny let out a mental sigh of relief.

'Just in time.'

He watched her raptly.

His star… was so breathtakingly beautiful.

Even surrounded by blood and tragedy, her radiant light was pure and full of splendor.

Neph's arrival halted the fighting across the entire center of the battlefield. And she…

She did not hold back.

Her flames spread outward, healing countless people — both the soldiers of the Sword Army and the soldiers of the Song Army, not making any distinctions between friend or foe.

Of course, there was still a limit to whom Nephis could save. Her healing flames would only affect those who were connected to her as part of her nascent Domain from a distance — if a person was not integrated into the net of longing she had inspired deep enough, however, she could only affect them through direct touch.

Just as she did with the dying Handmaiden.

Had she sensed Seishan approaching, or had she truly wanted to save the former member of the Dream Army?

Sunny wasn't sure.

He could not help but admire Neph's showmanship, though.

The entire battlefield was enthralled by her and her actions, without a doubt. The seeds of longing were falling into the fertile soil of countless hurting souls, thus expanding the foundation of her future Domain. People needed hope the most in the depths of hell, after all, and this battlefield was no different from a hellish nightmare.

At the same time, the seeds of political intrigue that Cassie, Nephis, and Sunny had sown far in advance were blooming, as well.

Nephis had already established herself as a reluctant participant in the war and the only voice of dissent among the warmongers. Considering her previous feats and her flawless adherence to the noble duty of an Awakened, her reputation was stellar among the warriors of both the Song Domain and the Sword Domain.

And now, that reputation was being cemented in their hearts. The countless soldiers she had saved, and everyone who had seen her saving them, would never forget the grace and mercy of Changing

Star of the Immortal Flame... contrasted sharply against the ruthless will of the Sovereigns.

…And the more disillusioned and tired of the war they grew, the easier it would be for them to accept her eventual rebellion.

They might applaud her for betraying her adopted family and engaging in a little bit of royal patricide, even, when the time came.

Even Sunny was having trouble discerning if Neph's actions at the moment were sincere or calculated. They very well could have been both of those things…

He did know that she was putting on at least a bit of an intentional show, however.

That was because Nephis had never attempted healing on such a massive scale before. Not only would saving countless soldiers have consumed a truly terrifying amount of soul essence, but it would have also brought her immeasurable pain.

Her humanity would have been scorched and burned by the agony. It was a miracle that she had managed to keep the suffering from showing on her face, really… in any case, she would not be in a state to show benevolence, let alone compassion.

So, at least some of her actions were a coldly premeditated act.

The soldiers saw her as a beautiful, merciful, and noble savior.

And she was all that — but at the same time, beneath the surface and above all else, she was a ruthless, calculating, and chillingly ambitious destroyer.

A herald of change and ruin.

…She was beautiful in either case, though.

As Nephis spoke to Seishan, challenging the Saints of the Song Domain to battle, Sunny smiled.

The goddess had already descended onto the battlefield.

Now, it was time for the devil to make his entrance, as well.

Chapter-2005: Strength in Numbers

"...Who will stop me?"

This simple sentence that Nephis had spoken hid many meanings and carried plenty of weight.

Although very few people knew her well enough to understand the true burden of these words, they were a proclamation of who she was — and how unyielding her will was, as well. It was her defiant challenge to the world, calling the world to come and try to stop her… if it dared.

But, at the same time, there was a far more obvious meaning to what Nephis had said.

First, she was hinting that Seishan and the Saints of Song had no choice but to fight her — because once Nephis entered the battle and unleashed her flames upon the Song Army, only they would be able to contend against her.

At the same time, she was also telling Seishan something else. It was that no one could prevent her from entering the battle... except for two people.

Anvil of Valor and Ki Song, the Sovereigns of humanity.

By joining the battle, Nephis was going directly against their will. However, she was so powerful that no one except for the person who had given the order or his adversary could punish her for breaking it.

That would require the Sovereigns to interfere personally, though, thus escalating the battle even further and inevitably resulting in a direct clash between them — because if one of them moved, the

other would not remain still.

The two Supremes, however, were not willing to fight each other just yet.

Which led to Neph's last point.

It was that even if there was someone who could stop her, there was no one who would.

That she could break the will of the Sovereigns with impunity, and nobody could do anything about it.

…It was a powerful message to send.

But not an unwelcome one, as far as Seishan was concerned — for one simple reason.

It was that what Nephis had proposed — stop the bloodshed and decide the outcome of the battle with a clash between only the Saints of both armies — favored the Song Domain greatly.

There were many more Saints in the Song Army, after all.

They had already held an advantage in that regard at the very start of the war, and their advantage only became greater after Morgan's departure and the battle at Vanishing Lake.

The situation had worsened even further since then.

Three expeditions had been sent into the depths of Godgrave to conquer its remaining Citadels. Revel and her First Royal Legion had gone into the darkness of the Spine Ocean, accompanied by Moonveil… while a punitive expedition had set out from the camp of the Sword Army to destroy them.

Considering how powerful the daughters of Ki Song were, that expedition numbered seven Saints.

Additionally, Summer Knight was heading south with two Saints accompanying him, while the Queen of Worms had given up on conquering the Femur Citadel, thus sending no one.

So, in the end…

The Song Army, which had only lost one Transcendent champion since the start of the war, could muster forty-six Saints in this battle. The Sword Army, meanwhile, could only muster twenty-four… twenty-three, really, considering that Saint Tyris was too important for Anvil to risk losing her.

In short... Seishan had no less than twice as many Saints to accompany her into battle as Nephis had.

What reason did she have to refuse?

'Ah… it's going to be a long day.'

Still embracing Rain as a shadow, Sunny sent her a mental message:

[That is your cue to get the hell away.]

His sister flinched, then helped Tamar stand up and rushed away from where Changing Star and the Lost Princess of Song were facing each other.

All around her, the warriors of the Song Army were following suit, receding like a tide. A vast open space was opening between the two retreating armies, painted by blood and littered with mangled corpses.

Sunny let out a mental sigh and shifted most of his focus to the Lord of Shadows.

The fighting at the center of the battlefront might have stopped, but on the flanks, the Awakened were still clashing and killing each other. Sunny headed for the left flank, where both armies were in great disarray.

His entrance was far less spectacular than Neph's.

Sunny simply rose from the shadows amidst the slaughter, silently and without drawing any attention.

Suddenly, a fearsome figure in black onyx armor was standing among

the desperately fighting soldiers, darkness nestling in the gaping abyss of its demonic eyes.

His long white hair — a permanent fixture whenever he wore either of his masks now — was moving slightly in the wind.

A few soldiers noticed him and staggered away in fright, some of them falling to the ground. But that was all.

Sunny sighed.

'No, this won't do… it won't do at all…'

And as he did, the shadows across the battlefield stirred.

Suddenly, the world shuddered, and a towering black wall soared from the ground into the sky, sending countless Awakened flying. It seemed to be made from obsidian, its surface rough and uneven, almost absorbing the light.

The great wall stretched for several kilometers, effectively cutting the left flank of the battlefield in two.

The Sword Army had remained on one side of the great wall of obsidian, separated from the Song Army by its tenebrous width.

Of course, there were stragglers left on both sides — but no one was in the mood to swarm them and bring them down.

Just like at the center before, the battle suddenly and abruptly came to a halt. Everyone was staring at the vast expanse of black obsidian in fear and shock.

…And at Sunny, too.

It was quite a spectacular way to leave a strong impression.

He nodded in satisfaction.

'That's better.'

Just at that moment, a Master from the Sword Army finally

recognized him.

Falling to one knee, the young man looked up with awe and terror in his trembling eyes.

"L—lord Shadow! Sir!"

Sunny stared at him silently for a few moments.

'Well… I'll be damned.'

It was his old friend — young Master Tristan of Aegis Rose. Rivalen's son.

Somehow, the fool was still alive.

Sunny smiled faintly behind the mask and looked away.

"Retreat. This is the King's command."

The young Master opened his eyes wide, then bowed and dashed away, shouting orders.

Soon, the Sword Army started to pull back.

Sunny allowed the obsidian wall to crumble into a tide of shadows — the damn thing was consuming too much essence — and watched the Song Army retreat. The stragglers were already hurrying to catch up with their retreating comrades.

The real mess was about to start.

Chapter-2006: The Real Mess

Sunny was on the left flank of the battlefield, while Nephis was in the center.

The right flank, meanwhile…

[Cassie?]

There were a few moments of silence, and then the blind seer's voice resounded in his mind.

[I've arrived.]

Indeed… today's battle was so important and terribly skewed in favor of the enemy that even Song of the Fallen, the Seneschal of the Great Clan Valor — someone who was not supposed to appear on a battlefield often, serving her King and Domain in other ways — had no choice but to enter the fray.

In fact, every Saint of the Sword Army was either already here or on their way — except for Sky Tide, who had been ordered to remain with the King of Swords in the rear.

Their enemies were already here, too. As the tide of Song soldiers receded, dozens of motionless figures were revealed, standing apart from each other across the expansive battlefield.

Sunny felt a strange mixture of somber wariness and anticipation.

Each Saint was a force to be reckoned with… and the enemy had twice as many Saints as his side.

There were the puppets of the Queen, as well. There was also the horde of Nightmare Creatures enthralled by Beastmaster…

And he had not forgotten that there were still three of Mordret's

Reflections left intact, somewhere out there.

The odds did not seem very promising for the Sword Saints.

'How many will die?'

Sunny suddenly felt a chill.

It was hard to kill a Saint, and even harder to prevent one from escaping should they wish to flee. Those who had reached Transcendence also possessed an incredible wealth of martial experience — they would know when to continue the fight and when to retreat.

…Still, Saints were going to die today.

Countless soldiers would be spared from the cold embrace of death, but death would not remain unfed. It was just that the souls it swallowed would be far more nourishing and potent.

Of course, the number of the fallen would be infinitely smaller…

But not the significance.

In fact, the two Domains would sustain far more damage if a handful of Saints were killed than if a myriad of Awakened died.

That was because only Saints could claim Citadels, thus expanding a Sovereign's Domain over vast territories. Currently, there were more Saints in the world than there were conquered Citadels — but not by much.

If enough Transcendent champions were killed today, some of the strongholds of humanity in the Dream Realm would be left without masters. And therefore…

The Domains would shrink, losing some of their overall power… a directly opposite result to what the Sovereigns had wanted to achieve by fighting over land in Godgrave.

The Domains would grow weaker.

…Was that part of Neph's calculation, as well?

It surely was.

'How devious.'

Sunny should know... after all, he had come up with the plan himself.

In the end, her enthralling display of grace and noble virtue had not just empowered her nascent Domain, but would also lay the groundwork for weakening the Domains of her enemies.

Sunny smiled sadly behind the mask.

He felt a little dirty.

Neither of them really wanted to see Saints die — each Saint was a treasure of humanity, after all. So, usually, they would not take steps to ensure the loss of Transcendent lives.

However, the situation was different today, because these lives were weighed against the lives of countless Awakened and Ascended warriors. Those were a treasure of humanity, too — both as they were, and due to their unrealized potential.

So, in a zero-sum game, the conspirators were justified to choose the sacrifice that would further their goals more. And on a purely human level… it felt less shameful, to sacrifice a few for the benefit of many. Especially if they themselves would be risking their lives side by side with those few.

But still, Sunny did not feel good about the situation.

He had no doubt that Nephis would not be feeling very pleasant at the moment, either — if she was still capable of feeling anything, having been numbed to emotions by the pain of her Flaw.

…The Saints themselves were going to be troubled, too — those who survived, of course. The loss of life among the soldiers was already painful enough, considering that White Feather had not been the only clan to send its warriors into battle. But dying and killing their former friends and comrades personally was both far more visceral

and far more poignant an experience.

And as the loyalty the Saints had for the Sovereigns diminished and their discontent grew, no matter how little, Neph's position would improve further still.

Because the doubts the people fighting for the two great armies felt were only useless in the lack of an alternative to the iron rule of the two Sovereigns.

If an alternative did present itself one day in the future, though…

Well.

No matter how unpleasant it was, Nephis had made a brilliant move.

There would be consequences later, without doubt. Anvil would definitely not be happy with her defiance… but those were problems for the future.

Now, all Nephis, Sunny, and Cassie had to do… was actually survive the battle and make sure that the overwhelming advantage of the Song Domain did not lead to a wholesale slaughter of the Sword Saints.

'They have twice as many… hell…'

Sunny was not alone on the left flank of the battlefield. A few other Saints had joined him, as well — now, what remained was to see which strategy the Song Domain would choose.

They could just send two Saints of Song to fight each individual Sword Saint. Of course, that was unlikely — after all, they knew how powerful Changing Star and the Lord of Shadows were. They also knew about Saint, Fiend, and Serpent.

Cassie might give them an unpleasant surprise, but in the grand scheme of things, her presence on the battlefield was not too impactful.

Sunny could see Saint Rivalen in the distance. He had assumed his Transcendent form, squaring against a single Saint of the Song

Domain — the giant reptile with powerful legs and strangely short arms that Rain had seen tearing Nightmare Creatures apart in the Hollows.

On the other side, Helie was facing a Saint who had chosen to maintain a human form.

And a little further away, there was Roan.

…Also faced by a single opponent.

Sunny suddenly felt a bad premonition.

'Just… how high is their opinion of me?'

Looking straight ahead, he lowered his head slightly.

'One, two, three…'

The darkness nestling in the eyes of Weaver's mask stirred slightly.

…Apparently, it was extremely high.

Because there were thirteen enemy Saints moving to surround him in a wide half-circle.

Chapter-2007: Exchanging Pleasantries

Thirteen… was a lot of Saints to face alone, even for Sunny.

Not that he had ever tried.

He had seen most of them in battle already, as well. Each was a dire adversary…

The obsidian giant with the head of a jackal towered above the blood-soaked battlefield like a malevolent deity. The hill-sized canine with three heads — Saint Ceres — was moving with measured steps, her low growls reverberating across the vast expanse of Godgrave. The alluring woman with a strangely wicked half-smile playing on her lively face was Saint Siord — the beautiful harpy he had seen in the Hollows.

There were others, as well.

But Sunny mostly paid attention to three of them.

Silent Stalker. Lonesome Howl.

…And a mesmerizing enchantress with long hair that fell like an onyx waterfall, fair skin, and tantalizing red lips. She wore a dashing armor of black leather and scarlet silk, which seemed to accentuate her sensual figure and breathtaking beauty effortlessly.

An ugly scar marred the perfection of her enchanting face, running from her forehead to the tip of her chin.

'...Beastmaster.'

Sunny suddenly felt a headache.

He also felt quite lonely while surrounded by so many enemies.

So… he called a few friends to come keep him company.

As the Saints of Song approached, three figures rose from his three shadows.

Saint stepped onto the battlefield, wielding a round shield and a sword of pure darkness. Her fearsome onyx armor seemed to absorb the light, and two ruby flames were burning behind the visor of her helmet with cold indifference.

Fiend straightened his towering body, sunlight glistening on the countless spikes that littered the polished surface of his steel carapace. His four hands moved, each claw like a razor-sharp sword.

A serpentine shadow coiled on the sun-bleached bone and then rose, turning into a breathtaking woman whose body seemed to be made from inky darkness… Serpent had become a shadow of Solvane, the Priestess of War.

Sunny smiled behind the mask.

'That's better.'

Finally, the Saints of Song finished their approach.

Beastmaster was standing right in front of Sunny, still remaining a safe distance away — Lonesome Howl was to her left, while Silent Stalker was to her right.

None of them had assumed their Transcendent forms yet, so Sunny could see their expressions quite well.

Lonesome Howl seemed relaxed and impatient to fight, but there was a hint of sober caution behind her carefree squint.

Silent Stalker was cold and gloomy, looking at him with a dark, impenetrable impression. Her piercing gaze was sharp and heavy.

…Beastmaster, however, appeared to be in a good mood. She looked at Sunny with a beguiling smile and spoke in a calm, husky voice:

"The infamous Lord Shadow… it is a pleasure to finally meet you. I've heard so much about you, after all. I hope that you know who I am?"

Sunny just stared at her silently, his figure radiating a sense of coldness, ruthlessness, and dread.

Eventually, he answered with chilling indifference:

"No idea. Should I? "

Beastmaster's smile seemed to falter for a split second, but then, she let out a melodious laugh.

"Allow me to introduce myself, then. I am Beastmaster, Princess of the Song Domain. I'll be in your care today."

Sunny tilted his head a little, not saying anything.

After a few moments of silence, Beastmaster nodded gracefully.

"A man of few words… how admirable. In fact, there are several qualities about you that I find worthy of admiration — quite a few, actually. So… I hope you don't mind that I have come to welcome you accompanied by others. Considering your great strength, you wouldn't have wanted Clan Song to humiliate you by only sending one or two Saints here… would you?"

Sunny grimaced behind the mask.

Actually, he would have loved to deal with a couple of Saints and swiftly move on to other parts of the battlefield, picking off the rest of them one by one.

Alas, that was not meant to be.

He lifted his chin a little.

"Indeed. I would have been enraged if your Queen only sent a few of her minions to face me. This, though… this makes me quite content. I only regret that you didn't bring more."

Beastmaster studied him silently for a few moments.

Then, her tantalizing smile widened a little.

At the same time, he sensed her power assaulting his mind.

It was not a full-out attack… for now. Just a little push to probe his defenses.

Well, could Sunny really blame this poor woman? She was so beautiful, so gentle, so… precious. And yet, her mother had sent her to face the vicious fiend of the Sword Army in a battle.

A lovely flower like Beastmaster had to be treasured, nurtured, and protected — not put in harm's way. Protected by someone strong enough to shield her from the vile greed of this impure, wicked world.

Someone like Sunny.

He frowned, and the shadows across the battlefield stirred in response.

Without moving a muscle, Sunny said coldly:

"...Stop flirting with me, wench. I'm taken."

If Beastmaster was taken aback, she did not show it. The mirth in her tantalizing eyes did dim a little, however, replaced with a hint of eerie interest.

"I see."

She sighed, and then moved her shoulders slightly.

"A pity. No one is perfect, I guess…"

Sunny blinked.

No, but why did even her insults have to sound so… exciting?

In the next moment, however, his expression changed.

Because he suddenly had a bad premonition.

And there, behind the thirteen Saints… three more figures emerged, moving forward with dreadful speed.

The Reflections.

All three had assumed the same form… that of a monstrous, towering creature that had a tail like that of an enormous snake, two powerful hands protruding from a human-like torso, and a bestial head with a long and toothy snout brimming with terrifying fangs.

The creatures looked quite familiar…

In fact, Sunny knew their kind quite well.

They were like older and more dreadful, wingless versions of the Chain Worms — who were a tribe of Nightmare Creatures that populated the darkness beneath the Chained Isles.

The Chain Worms bore that name because they fed on the heavenly chains that held the flying islands together… or on any metal, really, as long as they could sink their fangs into it.

'Now where…'

Before Sunny could finish the thought, one of the Song Saints seemed to unleash their Aspect Ability.

The space around him suddenly shimmered, as if turning into glass. And when that glass shattered, Sunny and his Shadows were suddenly separated by a great distance.

The Saints of Song were now apart, as well.

The three Chain Worms were surrounding Fiend. Three Saints were surrounding Saint, and three more were surrounding Serpent.

While Sunny himself…

Was facing Beastmaster, Lonesome Howl, Silent Stalker, and four others.

Beastmaster smiled.

"...I bet I can fix you, though. Lord Shadow."

Sunny snarled.

Taking a step forward, he shaped the shadows into a sword and said in a chilling tone:

"When we are done, who is going to fix you?"

Chapter-2008: Terrifying Beast

The exchange of pleasantries was over, and the battle of the Saints had now begun.

As if to signify its descent, the ground shook violently, and a thunderous roar of a distant explosion rolled across the battlefield, coming from somewhere far to the right.

Nephis must have engaged her own share of Transcendent foes.

Sunny wondered briefly how many Saints the Song Army had sent to face her. More than him? Or less?

In any case, it did not really matter...

No matter how many of them Song sent, it wouldn't be enough.

The Saints of the two armies clashed across the vast length of the battlefield, ripping the fabric of the world apart. Today was a day for many firsts — the previous battle had been the first time such an inconceivable number of Awakened warriors entered the battlefield, for example, all consumed by the murderous song of war.

And now, close to seventy Saints — most of the Saints there were in existence — were fighting with each other in their stead… it was the most terrifying clash humans had ever witnessed, by far, dwarfing the bloody battles of the Chain of Nightmares with absolute ease.

Far away, the soldiers of the two retreating armies froze in place, watching the dreadful calamity in terror.

The gods were fighting. What were mortal men to do?

Of course, at the moment, Sunny did not care much about their plight. As one of the warring demigods, he had his own problems to

solve…

And what diabolical problems they were.

'This is going to be... damn interesting…'

Facing seven powerful Saints was not something even he could take lightly.

Especially if three of them were of a divine lineage.

The lineage of Beast God...

An unknown power had shattered space, throwing Sunny and his Shadows apart. Of course, he immediately attempted to remedy the situation by ordering Fiend to come back by using Shadow Step.

Sadly, it did not work. The space was continuously being manipulated, and every time the steel Shadow tried to escape, it folded on itself, bringing him right back.

Sunny was not sure if the shattering of the space had been done by an enemy Aspect or a powerful Memory in possession of one the Queen's daughters, but it was quite effective in preventing him and his Shadow from moving freely to support each other — for now, at least.

His Shadows would have to fend for themselves, and so would Sunny.

He wasn't very worried about Saint and Serpent. Fiend, however…

It seemed that Song had learned their lesson after losing two of Mordret's Reflections to the ravenous steel troll. Today, they had come prepared to deal with the Supreme Devil who served the Lord of Shadows.

Sunny did not know where the Song Army had found the older and more terrifying cousins of the Chain Worms, but the three appalling creatures were a very detrimental foe for Fiend.

After all, they fed on metal, and his entire body was made from blessed steel.

'Not good…'

Still, Sunny wasn't too worried about Fiend, either — if Song thought that the most frightening thing about that little imp was his impenetrable steel armor, they were going to learn the error of their ways quite soon.

In fact, Sunny was mostly worried about himself.

Fighting seven Saints was better than fighting thirteen… but it was still a challenge.

Taken individually, each of these exalted warriors was not a real threat to Sunny — and even if their collective power was summed up, he would not have to cower in front of it.

However, that was the peril and dread of fighting humans… when several of them came together, the sum was often greater than the parts. Sunny had known it from all the way back on the Forgotten Shore, where dealing with the Carapace Scavengers had become more tenable than it was supposed to be after Nephis joined him.

Even added together, the power of two Sleepers was not comparable to that of an Awakened Beast. However, with Nephis serving as bait and Sunny attacking from the shadows, they had managed to bring countless of those terrifying beasts down.

That was simply the most elementary example of how cooperating with another human could enhance one's lethality far beyond one's power.

And in the present situation… it was Sunny who played the role of a terrifying beast. The Saints of Song, meanwhile, were the weaker hunters who had joined forces to bring him down.

'Dangerous.'

His enemies were among the most seasoned warriors of humanity, as well. They knew how to cooperate with each other seamlessly, not making any mistakes he could exploit.

There was not enough space for more than three of them to attack

him at the same time, for example. So, instead of rushing forward all together and getting in each other's ways, four Saints fell back while three advanced at him with stunning speed.

The three attackers were the obsidian jackal, the three-headed canine — Ceres — and Lonesome Howl.

It did not mean that the other four were doing nothing, though.

In fact, they might have posed more danger than the melee vanguard.

He could already see Silent Stalker nocking an arrow on the string of her bow, while Beastmaster spun a strange-looking sling.

Two remaining Saints took to the sky — one of them was Siord, the harpy, while the second one was a gargoyle with a powerful stone body and wide wings.

The Saint of Sorrow. Tamar's father was here, too.

Sunny was going to have to deal with a barrage of ranged attacks pretty soon.

But first…

He had to survive the obliterating assault of three melee powerhouses.

Ceres and Lonesome Howl were already tough enough to handle. It was the obsidian giant that gave Sunny the most pressure due to the sheer immensity of his size, though.

The jackal towered above the battlefield like a dark titan, wielding an enormous polearm with a gold crescent blade. That polearm… seemed great and sharp enough to cleave a small fortress in half.

Watching the towering giant barrel at him with murder burning in his bestial eyes, Sunny felt like an ant.

He was suddenly… annoyed.

This scene reminded him of facing Goliath for the first time.

Those were not happy memories.

And although the obsidian jackal was truly blameless in that regard…

He was going to pay for making Sunny remember something so unpleasant.

'Let's see which one of us is the ant…'

As the bestial giant approached, Sunny was suddenly enveloped by a tide of shadows.

And then, a colossal figure forged from pure darkness rose to meet the giant face-to-face.

Chapter-2009: A Wolf, a Dog, and a Jackal

Sunny was still unable to use the Shadow Lantern — or rather, too wary to open its gates. As a result, he was cut off from the nearly inexhaustible supply of shadows for the first time in a long, long while.

So, the Shadow Shell he had woven out of the wild shadows that dwelled naturally on the battlefield was not nearly as titanic as it could have been.

Nevertheless, it was more than tall enough to match the height of the obsidian giant, and even higher than that, towering above him by a few meters.

The Onyx Mantle covered the colossal Shell created in the image of Sunny's own body like a fearsome black carapace. It was nothing new… however, today, this transformation of his felt different.

That was because he was doing something he had never done before — controlling one of the shadows as an incarnation and augmenting himself with it. Therefore, Sunny felt a strange and incongruous, but not entirely unnatural sensation — that of being himself, but also something other than himself, which had in turn become one with his body.

Basically, he was doing the same thing he had been practicing with his Shadows and Memories, but aimed at his own mind, body, and soul.

That allowed him to push the state of fusion with the Shell even further, making it feel almost like his actual self.

Sunny felt powerful. Sunny felt vast. He felt… as if his every motion

held within itself untold devastation.

There was another curious thing that had happened as a result, as well.

It seemed as if that flawless union between the Shadow Shell and him was not merely a sensation. Rather, it was as if the world itself did not see the difference between Sunny and the Shadow Colossus anymore, or at least not so strongly, regarding both as manifestations of his soul.

And Weaver's Mask did, as well.

So, it had expanded in size, shifting to cover the dark titan's face. This mask had been meant to fit the face of a nebulous deity, after all… it was more than capable of hiding the features of giants. So, Sunny did not have to create a facsimile out of shadows, like he had usually done in the past.

He had to admit, though…

Weaver's Mask had always been fearsome and deeply disturbing. Now that it was the size of a tall edifice, however, it suddenly seemed ten times more terrifying.

He wasn't surprised that his enemies seemed slightly hesitant, all of a sudden.

But their wills were not going to be shaken by a frightening visage, and so, their earth-shattering assault continued without slowing down even for a moment.

The obsidian jackal brought his crescent polearm down. His devastating slash seemed powerful enough to slice the very fabric of the world apart, but its momentum broke a moment later.

Sunny had long known how the enemy Saint was going to attack. Having read his intentions in the movements of his body, of his shadow, and of his essence, Sunny had grasped the very core of the enemy's sophisticated Transcendent Battle Art and learned the enemy's intentions far in advance.

So, he fearlessly stepped into the range of the Jackal's weapon, avoiding the crescent blade, and grasped the shaft of the polearm with one armored hand.

There was a loud thunderclap and a devastating shockwave the moment the wooden shaft came into contact with the onyx gauntlet. As its momentum was instantly drained, Sunny's feet were suddenly enveloped by a crimson haze — the blood smearing the surface of the ancient bone had absorbed the dire force of the impact and evaporated, turning into a scorching cloud.

Sunny himself — the conduit of all that destructive energy — had not even flinched, though. He just held the crescent blade in place, unmoving, like a black mountain.

He was not satisfied by simply blocking that first strike, either… of course.

As soon as his left hand grasped the shaft of the crescent polearm, his right arm was already turning into a fist, ready to crash into the skull of the Jackal like a fortress-toppling ram.

'Let's see how tough you are…'

However, before Sunny had a chance to strike the jackal, a swift and massive shadow lunged at him from the side, and his right hand was suddenly caught in the crushing vice of a monstrous wolf's jaws.

Lonesome Howl had timed her attack to coincide with the fall of the crescent blade.

Her fur was bristling like a black palisade, and furious red flames were burning in her enormous, bestial eyes.

Saint Ceres was not far behind, either.

A split second later, she lunged at Sunny from the left, one of her heads biting into his shin, a second sinking its fangs into his knee, and the last one tearing into his thigh.

There was an ear-piercing sound of sharp fangs scratching against the stonelike metal.

Sunny was momentarily immobilized.

His left hand was holding the Jackal's weapon, preventing it from cleaving his shell apart. His right hand was caught in Lonesome Howl's eviscerating jaws. The enormous three-headed canine was trying to pull his leg apart, using all its infernal strength to topple him.

Curiously enough…

The Onyx Mantle withstood the fangs of Saint Ceres. It shattered under the fangs of the stygian she-wolf, though — Lonesome Howl had bitten his gauntlet, shredding the hand and wrist of the Shadow Shell with vicious fury.

And, of course, the other four Saints were not staying idle.

Silent Stalker had already released an arrow, and Beastmaster had already sent a piece of bone flying from her slingshot.

Sunny barely had time to register the two projectiles, which were flying in his direction with terrible speed.

He did not like the look of either of them.

Both the arrow and the piece of bone were destructive Memories, no doubt. Clan Song was sparing no effort in trying to bring him down today… so, they would use heavy artillery from the start.

If either of the projectiles found its mark, his Shadow Shell would probably be mangled quite badly.

The usefulness of Shadow Step was limited by the shattered space around them, and there were not enough wild shadows on the battlefield to reform the giant Shell if it was badly damaged.

...But it did not matter.

Sunny possessed an Aspect that possessed many strengths, but its greatest one by far was its versatility. Even bound by so many restrictions, he still had a sea of tactics to choose from, and a rich treasure of devious tricks to employ.

That was what made him so dangerous.

Sunny pushed away the golden crescent, making the bestial giant stagger back. With his left hand now free, he struck down, delivering a terrifying blow to one of the canine heads that were trying to mangle his leg.

The blow did not quite crack the creature's skull, but Ceres was definitely dazed and in pain… well, at least a third of her was dazed and in pain.

A torrent of blood flowed from one of her crushing maws, and her hold on his thigh grew weak.

Using the chance, Sunny grabbed the hill-sized canine by the scruff of her neck. At the same time, he dismissed several elements of the Onyx Mantle, thus escaping from her remaining two sets of terrifying fangs.

Suddenly, Ceres was being pulled into the air, her pillar-like paws losing contact with the ground.

Deep within the Shadow Colossus Shell, Sunny smiled coldly.

And then, he hoisted the three-headed canine up with one hand, placing her enormous body between himself and the two incoming projectiles at the last moment.

Chapter-2010: Heavy Hand of Shadow

All of it took no more than a heartbeat.

Sunny knew that Clan Song had a vast arsenal of powerful Memories — some of them even of the Supreme Rank, without a doubt. After all, even if Nephis was right and the Spell created those far more parsimoniously than the Memories of the lower Ranks, Ki Song had been a Sovereign for decades.

Seven of her daughters were also Saints, and he knew from personal experience that at least some of them were more than capable of slaying Great Nightmare Creatures with ease.

So, he had expected something extraordinary to happen when Silent Stalker's arrow and Beastmaster's bone projectile struck Ceres.

However, he was both disappointed and a little relieved to have been mistaken.

Because nothing happened, instead.

His enemies were far too outstanding to wound one of their own so foolishly. Even though there was only a split second to react, both Beastmaster and Silent Stalker managed to dismiss their Memories in time, so all that hit the enormous canine were two swirling streams of radiant sparks.

So, Sunny did not hesitate to continue with the momentum of lifting her up… and slammed Ceres into the ground with all his dreadful might.

The battlefield quaked, and a pitiful whine escaped from all three of her bestial mouths.

At the same time, Lonesome Howl jerked her head sideways, tearing off his right arm with one powerful motion. A river of shadows flowed from the stump, pouring down like a dark waterfall.

'Ah…'

And the obsidian jackal had already recovered by then, bringing his golden polearm down once more.

Only, this time, Sunny had no time to dodge it, and no opportunity to block its descent.

So, he did not.

A moment before the crescent blade cleaved the Shadow Colossus apart… it simply fell apart on its own.

His onyx armor parted, and the inky-black body beneath parted, as well. For a few moments, there was a wide chasm separating the right side of the Shell from its left side.

The polearm plummeted through this chasm, not dealing Sunny any damage.

And the Shadow Shell simply mended itself as soon as the golden blade passed.

By the time it plunged into the crimson haze and crashed into the surface of the ancient bone with a deafening thunderclap, the Shadow Colossus was as good as new.

Well… it was still missing a hand. But otherwise, his body was whole and undamaged.

'...Finally.'

Sunny had always been a bit envious because of failing to learn how to perform this trick. Fiend had used it against him all the way back in Antarctica, after all, but despite having slain him there, Sunny — the vengeful imp's new master — never managed to figure out how to partially turn his body into an incorporeal shadow himself.

Granted, this time, he had not just turned a part of his Shell intangible — he went a step ahead and created a physical breach in it. Otherwise, there would have been little sense in doing it at all.

Sunny possessed plenty of ways to cut intangible enemies, and the Saints of Song would have their own ways, as well.

Regardless…

Now, finally, Sunny could do what he had wanted to do from the very start.

The Jackal had not expected that his weapon would meet no resistance at all, so he had put a lot of force into his strike. As a result, his balance was broken, and he wasted a moment too many trying to regain it.

So, Sunny punched him in the snout with all the might he had.

The force of the impact was so fierce that there was actually a blinding flash. A moment later, the bestial giant toppled and fell in the thunderous boom of a violent thunderclap, causing the entire battlefield to tremble.

A few of his fangs rattled on the ancient bone, each large enough to crush several humans.

Sunny felt amused at the sight of them.

'I wonder if those will remain after he transforms back into a human…'

The first exchange was over, and it was Sunny's resounding win.

His Shell did lose a hand, but that was of no significance. Meanwhile, Ceres was seriously wounded, and the Jackal had received a terrible blow. Silent Stalker and Beastmaster had wasted their first, most important volley — it would take them a while to summon the powerful Memories back, and in a battle of Saints, those precious seconds could very well feel like an eternity.

However, the battle was only getting started.

And by the second exchange, Siord and the Saint of Sorrow would be joining the fray too.

Sunny was already suffering from not having enough hands to contend against all his foes. With two more added enemies into the mix, his numerical disadvantage was going to grow more dire, and would thus bring him closer to being overwhelmed.

'What to do, what to do…'

He considered doing something drastic for a moment.

Sunny had been patiently hiding the fact that he could manifest several bodies all this time, but now, he was considering if it was even worth it to continue the charade. It did seem like a perfect solution to his current predicament , as well as the last straw that could break the camel's back, thus helping him turn the tide of the entire battle.

…Whatever the hell a camel was.

It must have been quite a weird animal, considering that its back could be broken by a straw.

'Probably some invertebrate?'

However, in the end, Sunny kept his shadows wrapped tightly around his body.

Not because he didn't want to reveal his incarnations to the world, but simply because he couldn't.

At the moment, he had not experienced the most dreadful weapon his enemies had in store — Beastmaster's terrifying ability to manipulate one's mind.

The Onyx Mantle granted Sunny a high resistance to mental attacks, but he wasn't confident in resisting the tantalizing Saint with just that, or at least not entirely.

So, he needed the shadows to augment him — and the [Stalwart] trait of the Mantle — for as long as Beastmaster remained a threat.

And speaking of her…

Just as Sunny shifted his weight, preparing to repel another of Lonesome Howl's ferocious attacks, he suddenly felt it.

A powerful, insidious, and enthralling power invading his mind.

It felt muted and distant, as if weakened by a stalwart barrier, but still mesmerizing.

His limbs grew heavy all of a sudden.

'...Crap.'

As Sunny staggered, the monstrous wolf lunged at him like a tide of darkness and bestial fury.

At the same time, two swift shadows fell on him from the blinding sky.

And an arrow whistled through the air, aimed precisely at the point where his own shadow was hidden in the depths of the colossal Shell.

'I... really... hate mind attacks the most...'

Chapter-2011: Transcendent Battlefield

Sunny felt his limbs grow heavy, and his mind grow numb.

Suddenly, he felt worn down and exhausted. Every burden that he carried, enduring the oppressive weight both willingly and silently, was suddenly so much more grievous and tiresome.

This war went on for so long… and even before the war, he had never known a moment of peace. Having grown accustomed to torment and turmoil, Sunny had easily deceived himself into forgetting how dreadful the world truly was. But now, he felt it in his every bone all of a sudden.

At the same time…

A peculiar feeling bloomed in his mind.

A feeling of witnessing something infinitely beautiful, inviting, and wonderful. Something so wondrous, so amazing, and so… precious. It was as if a resplendent light had shone in the broken darkness of his mind, illuminating it gently and bringing tears to his eyes.

Enthralled by the beautiful radiance, Sunny found it hard and devoid of meaning to concentrate on anything, let alone move.

And yet, he did move.

Somewhere far away, Master Sunless was sitting in the darkness, weaving strings of shadow essence with six nimble hands. Looking up from his meditation, he frowned a little… and then drove the long needle through his hand, piercing it without a hint of hesitation.

A wave of sharp pain washed over his consciousness, making the

enthralling light waver and dim a little.

Sunny's mental resistance was already strong enough, and the additional push of feeling pain pushed him the rest of the way.

Shaking off the hex, the Lord of Shadows moved, too.

The towering onyx colossus turned his torso. In the next moment, Silent Stalker's arrow tore through the breastplate of his armor, pierced his body, and exploded from his back in a torrent of dissolving shadows.

If he had been a split second late, that arrow would have pierced his very soul instead of simply damaging the Shell.

'What a nice arrow…'

For a moment, Sunny felt aggrieved at having to live in a world where weapons were always more powerful than armor, and destruction was always easier to perpetrate than building something up.

No, but why was everyone trying to drive an arrow through his heart these days?

Staggering back, Sunny raised his maimed arm to prevent Lonesome Howl from tearing his throat open, activated Shadow Manifestation, and poured a little essence into the Extraordinary Rock, which lay nestled in the neck of the Shadow Colossus.

He barely survived the twin attack of the two winged Saints — which nearly tore off the head of his Shell — and then looked at his enemies silently.

In the next moment…

A low, deafening, chilling laughter resounded from behind the Weaver's Mask.

If Saint Jest had heard it, he would have been proud.

***

Somewhere not too far away, Rain dragged Tamar to where the battered warriors of the Seventh Legion had made a temporary camp the day before. Everywhere she looked, pale-faced warriors were resting on the ground, too rattled and exhausted to move.

The wounded were treated hurriedly in the field hospital, and she noticed Fleur tending to a man who was missing his leg. Ray was nearby, holding the soldier down.

The two of them were thankfully alive.

The battle was not over, but many of the soldiers had chosen to dismiss their armor, finally finding reprieve from the terrible heat. Some were staring down or covering their faces, trying to hide from the constant, harsh radiance of the overcast sky.

Most of them, however, were looking back to where they came, terrified and enthralled by the titanic battle that was taking place behind them.

Rain helped Tamar sit down and turned to look back, as well.

Her heart skipped a beat.

Both of them had heard the deafening thunder and felt the ground shaking while retreating. But it was only now that she witnessed the awesome devastation that had been unleashed by the clashing Saints.

It was…

As if the world was ending.

Rain and Tamar watched the calamity silently.

The camp of the Song Army was far enough that they were safe from the terrible shockwaves and destructive powers of the fighting demigods, which also meant that they could not discern much.

Still, she could vaguely see massive, monstrous silhouettes moving in the scorching haze.

There was a swath of the battlefield awash in white radiance. That

was where Changing Star was fighting, without a doubt. There was also…

"Look!"

Tamar's voice was hoarse and heavy.

Following her finger, Rain looked to the right and froze.

The young Legacy inhaled sharply.

"That… that is the Lord of Shadows."

Indeed, it was him… Rain's mischievous older brother.

Only, right now, he did not look anything like his usual self.

Instead, an onyx colossus in fearsome armor towered above the plain, besieged by three bestial figures. His movements seemed deceptively slow from the distance, but it was terrifying to see how easily he shrugged off the attacks of a cohort of Saints, resisting them all with a strange, frightening, and eerie grace.

'D—damn…'

The fury of that particular fight was harrowing enough to make everyone looking in that direction shiver in fright. A mere Awakened would have been reduced to bloody haze by simply being in the vicinity of the unholy clash.

This was the power of Saints.

Or… of this particular Saint, at least.

Still. He was already missing a hand, his right arm a mangled mess of darkness. His breastplate was pierced, and the enemies were only growing more vicious as the fight continued.

Rain suddenly felt something that she had never felt before…

She was worried about her teacher.

After lingering for a moment, she asked tentatively:

[Are… are you going to be alright?]

His voice resounded in her mind a few moments later, sounding as aloof and nonchalant as ever despite the dreadful battle in the distance.

[Who, me? Oh… I'm really touched that you worry about me, but don't fret. I'll be fine.]

There was a moment of silence, and then, he added in a more ominous tone:

[You should definitely be worried about the other guys, though…]

Chapter-2012: Hint of Fear

The Lord of Shadows was faltering.

It was hard to notice due to his fearsome appearance and the aura of cold arrogance emanating from the strangely graceful figure of the tenebrous colossus, but the mercenary Saint was losing ground.

Already, his right hand was missing. Silent Stalker's arrow had pierced his onyx chest, and Beastmaster had poisoned his mind. Of course, the Lord of Shadows was too strong to be entranced by her power quickly… but his movements had slowed down, losing some of their deadly precision.

Lonesome Howl could see it clearly, so she went for the kill.

…If that strange Transcendent form of his could even be killed like a living being. It bled darkness instead of blood, and was capable of splitting itself in half to avoid a blow. She had never seen anything like it.

Of course, that was entirely the problem with the Lord of Shadows — no one seemed to know anything about him, including the true extent of his abilities.

Clan Song had compiled an extensive database on all the living Saints — Clan Valor had as well, without a doubt. There were some secrets still kept hidden by the more cautious of the Transcendent champions, of course, but each of them was mostly a known existence.

Except for the Lord of Shadows, who had come out of nowhere about a year ago.

There was some information about him now, of course, gathered during the war. For example, they knew that his Transcendent form

was not really that of an onyx giant — rather, it was a malleable mass of shadows that could seemingly take any form, the giant simply being the most common one he used.

A troublesome Transformation, to say the least…

But not an indestructible one.

'He might not bleed, but does he feel pain?'

Lonesome Howl was eager to find out.

The Lord of Shadows was on the back foot, staggered by her sister's sharp arrow. Sadly, Silence failed to destroy the supposed core of the dark colossus, but she still made him sway.

That was Howl's chance to press the advantage.

Spitting out the torn hand of the enemy, she aimed for his throat and leaped…

However, she never managed to sink her fangs into his flesh.

'Wha…'

Suddenly, she felt something cold and alien wrapping around her snout, and then, her vision was obscured. Instead of ripping the enemy's throat open, Lonesome Howl crashed into something hard, and was then unceremoniously tossed aside.

Falling to the ground with a thunderous boom, she rolled and clawed at her face, trying to get the slithering presence off… before her eyes were pierced and destroyed.

Thank the gods, she managed.

With her vision blurry, Lonesome Howl looked down and recoiled.

A mass of dark tentacles had latched onto her neck, just below the jaw, three of them strangling her while four more extended to wrap themselves around her snout and loop around her head, thus covering her eyes.

At the center of the mass… the broken plates of polished armor could still be seen, serving as the source of the revolting creature.

The gauntlet.

This vile thing had been born from the severed hand of the Lord of Shadows, and was either an extension of him or being controlled by him.

'What… what the hell is he…'

She had hunted down and feasted on numerous Nightmare Creatures. But this… this was not something she had expected from a human…

If the Lord of Shadows even was a human.

Shuddering, Lonesome Howl allowed herself a split second of hesitation to figure out how to get rid of the seven dark tentacles and their source. Sadly, while her Transcendent form was both swift and powerful, it lacked opposable thumbs and nimble arms — so, she could not even reach it.

None of the Aspect Abilities would be of use, either.

Of course, there were plenty of ways to try and damage the… the thing… but Lonesome Howl chose the simplest method to break free.

She dismissed her Transcendent Ability and turned back into a human.

A moment later, she was laying on the ground.

And a moment after that, the remains of the onyx gauntlet and the wriggling mass of shadows growing from within it crashed into the ground several meters away, towering above her like a hill.

Growling, Lonesome Howl lunged forward and pierced the heart of the dark mass like a cannonball, ripping the vile creature apart with her bare hands.

It offered little resistance, dissolving into a torrent of darkness and breaking apart under her violent assault. The onyx shards rained onto

the blood-soaked surface of the ancient bone with a deafening noise.

Landing gracefully on the ground dozens of meters away, Lonesome Howl fell on all fours and activated her Transcendent Ability once again.

At the same time, she threw a glance at the Lord of Shadows… and shivered.

Out there, in front of her, Siord and the Saint of Sorrow finally delivered their first attack.

Plummeting from a great height — as great a height as was safe to ascend to here in Godgrave — both delivered terrible blows, which were assisted both by their tremendous acceleration and gravity.

Siord tossed a bronze javelin down, while the Saint of Sorrow simply used his stone body as a missile.

It was as though the Lord of Shadows had known of their attack in advance. Even slowed down by Bin's mind attack, he moved his towering body just far enough to avoid the mighty gargoyle, as if performing a step of a dance.

As for the javelin…

He simply raised his face to the sky, allowing that dreadful mask of his to receive the blow of the javelin.

There was a flash, and then a devastating roll of thunder. For a moment, it seemed as if the entire world was drowned out by pure whiteness, and as a violent tremor ran through the battlefield, a pillar of flame rose into the sky.

When the flash subsided, though…

The polished black surface of the wooden mask was whole and unblemished, without even a scratch on it, as if it was far more durable than even the fearsome onyx armor the mercenary Saint wore…

And Lonesome Howl could attest that it was one of the most resilient

Memories she had ever seen. After all, she pierced it with her own fangs… nothing had been able to survive her bite before, but the onyx armor nearly did.

Her transformation was complete.

Ceres had already picked herself up from the ground, blood flowing from her three mouths.

Jack was already on his feet again, wrath and resentment smoldering in his bestial eyes.

They were all ready to attack again…

Bin, Silence, Jack, Ceres, Siord, Sorrow, and Howl herself.

Both sides had sustained some damage, but they were burning with the desire to continue.

Lonesome Howl let out a threatening growl.

'How are you going to fight seven of us with one arm, sellsword?'

And as she looked up…

A low, reverberating, chilling laughter resounded from beneath the terrifying black mask.

Then, it turned even lower, resembling the voice of an actual demon.

The figure of the beautiful onyx colossus suddenly shrunk a little, becoming a few meters lower.

At the same time, it changed, shifting into something far more bestial.

Black horns rose from his head like a crown, glistening darkly in the blinding light of the radiant sky. A long tail with an onyx spike on its end whipped through the air. His knee joints seemed to reverse, and his feet grew, enormous claws scratching against the ancient bone.

Most importantly of all…

His severed hand seemed to regrow, and two more arms shot from his torso, each covered by the onyx carapace of the enchanted armor and ending with sharp claws.

A few moments later, a towering, terrifying dark demon was standing on the battlefield instead of a colossal human warrior…

One with six horns and four arms, the eerie mask hiding his inhuman features.

Looking at it, Lonesome Howl felt a bit of… unease.

Dejection, even.

And a tiny spark of fear.

'How... how do we even destroy this thing?'

Chapter-2013: Devil and the Seven Saints

'This is much better…'

Towering above the battlefield as the giant version of the Shadowspawn Shell, Sunny smiled darkly in the embrace of shadows.

His human body was still the most natural, and therefore the most effective form he could summon — in most battles, at least. But when he was outnumbered, the special traits of the Shadowspawn Shell truly shone.

Sunny had been pressed to contend against the seven Saints of Song, but now, his task was easier. He could keep his enemies at bay better with his four hands, sharp claws, and long tail.

His only regret was that Weaver's Mask prevented him from using his sharp fangs, too.

'Let us continue, then…'

The Saints of Song renewed their assault, and Sunny lunged forward to face them.

The world became consumed by an unending cannonade of roaring thunderclaps, blinding flashes, and violent quakes. Clouds of dust and debris rose into the air, and gargantuan figures moved within them, clashing with terrifying and furious force.

Their calamitous confrontation seemed unimaginably ferocious and primal, devoid of all reason except for bloodlust and murderous frenzy… in fact, that was how most of the Awakened witnessing the battle probably saw it.

After all, in their minds, beings of such size and power were akin to dreadful Nightmare Creatures, and Nightmare Creatures were not known for their technique and meticulousness.

However, in truth, the furious battle was nothing but technical and meticulous. Yes, it was awesome and fierce. But behind the veil of frenzied determination and bestial might, every Saint fighting the Lord of Shadows was using their keen intellect, cold regard, and sophisticated battle art to fight and keep surviving the deadly cadence of the titanic clash.

Nothing less could suffice in this terrible battle, while power and refined control were only antithetical to each other in the hands of amateurs.

When true masters fought, fury and calculation served to augment each other, fusing to create a devastating and flawlessly precise storm of destruction.

…Needless to say, Sunny himself was no different. It was just that his insight, skill, and finesse were even more sublime and daunting.

The battle… was not in any way an easy one for him. In fact, it was the opposite — it was one of the most dire and dangerous battles he had experienced since conquering the Third Nightmare.

Yes, he was making it look easy, even going so far as to laugh in the face of the devastating onslaught of potentially fatal attacks. But it was mostly to mislead and intimidate his enemies, not because he was truly relaxed in the middle of this chilling confrontation and taking it easy.

In truth, Saints were still Saints, and there were three bearers of a divine lineage among his enemies right now. Each attack directed at him had the potential to heavily damage his Shell, or even rip his soul to shreds directly — especially considering that Silent Stalker seemed to somehow know exactly where to aim, and relayed that information to the rest of the Song Saints promptly.

Even when he shifted the location of his incarnation within the Shell, her attacks continued to follow it without error.

Sunny could probably withstand a blow or two, but his luck could just as easily run out. He was in the situation where one mistake could mean — would mean — death... once again.

It was a familiar and almost nostalgic feeling, and therefore, he already knew what he needed to do.

He simply did not allow himself to make mistakes.

There was one great advantage he had in that regard, as well as one great disadvantage.

His advantage was, of course, Shadow Dance. Sunny had already seen most of the seven Saints fight at one point or another. He had faced some of them at Vanishing Lake, and had observed the others during the Seventh Legion's dreadful march to the Collarbone Citadel.

So, it did not take him long to get the initial grasp of their battle arts. Armed with that knowledge, he was largely able to predict what they were going to do, even if the details of how they were going to go about it still remained murky for some of the seven Saints.

There was no need to say how knowing your enemy's next move was a boon in any battle, and especially a battle like this one, where he was forced to be on the defensive against a superior number of foes.

His disadvantage, meanwhile… was Beastmaster.

Not only did Sunny not know much about her, but her Aspect was also incredibly insidious. His mind was still burdened by her tantalizing influence, and although the hex had not managed to entrance him completely, it still served to slow and weaken him.

That was not the only power Beastmaster had unleashed, either. Her second one was perhaps even more diabolical.

Her Awakened Ability allowed the mesmerizing Saint to mislead one's senses, causing the bedevilled victim to experience all kinds of illusions… or rather, it would be more appropriate to call them hallucinations, since they only existed inside the victim's mind.

These illusions were chillingly lifelike and nearly indistinguishable

from reality, affecting every sense at the same time. Sunny's formidable resistance against mental attacks still granted him a degree of protection, seemingly limiting what Beastmaster could make him believe — for example, she could not convince Sunny that Ki Song herself suddenly descended on the battlefield to kill him.

However, she could manipulate things that he already subconsciously believed were both possible and probable, creating phantom versions of herself and the other Saints of Song to confuse him.

At some point, Sunny could see Lonesome Howl lunging at him from the right, but at the same time, he saw an indistinguishable copy of her lunging at him from the left — both growling, making the ground shake, and raising powerful gales of hurricane wind with their passing. At another, he could see the towering Jackal attack him with a downward slash, while at the same time performing a horizontal swipe.

The hallucinations were faithful enough to make him feel pain when the illusory enemies wounded him. More than that, Beastmaster's skill was even refined enough to recreate the mystical presence that Saints usually emanated.

Luckily…

They had one telling flaw.

Since she was constructing them consciously, the illusions could only possess traits that Beastmaster created consciously. And while she was a true artist as far as driving people mad went, she could only create what she knew.

Beastmaster knew how an illusion was supposed to look, smell, sound, feel, and taste, and she even knew how to falsify a Transcendent presence. However, she did not possess shadow sense, nor did she know that shadow sense existed.

For that reason, the shadows of the illusory enemies she sent to confuse Sunny were subtly inconsistent and wrong. They looked right, and even felt right as far as their shape and depth went. But they were not shadows that living beings cast — instead, they were

all akin to shadows cast by inanimate objects.

So, Sunny had to ignore most of his senses and only rely on shadow sense to discern which enemies were real, and which ones were fake.

That allowed him to navigate the battle and survive the barrage of real attacks…

Sadly, it did not save him from the illusory pain.

And it hurt a lot.

Slowed down and weakened, constantly confused between what was real and unreal, Sunny stubbornly persisted in his fight against the seven Saints of Song. He managed to push them back from time to time, even.

Still...

It was such a draining and unpleasant battle. Appalling, really.

He would much rather fight Revel again... or someone like King Daeron, even.

Gritting his teeth behind Weaver's Mask, Sunny briefly threw a glance in the direction where Beastmaster was standing, spinning her sling once again.

She was just as bewitching and breathtaking as ever.

…He really wanted to kill someone today.

Chapter-2014: Fateful Choice

Sunny was appalled.

He might have been the most honest man in two worlds, but he was definitely not the kindest. Subjected to the ceaseless barrage of lethal attacks and battered by the enemy, reeling from Beastmaster's mental manipulation and intoxicated by the thrill of battle, he felt bloodlust slowly bloom in his heart.

His combat instinct had been nurtured by countless battles against Nightmare Creatures, after all — not humans. So, he rarely had to wonder whether to kill the enemy or not. His instincts were telling him to show no mercy and slaughter the Saints of Song in the fastest and most brutal manner.

But at the same time…

He did not really want to, or have a reason to. On the contrary, Sunny's ultimate goal required these people to remain alive. They had important roles to play in the aftermath of the war, helping humanity endure and face the dire challenges that lay ahead. He needed to give these Saints a reason to see Nephis as a potential ally, not kill them.

Take Beastmaster, for example…

Sure, she was insidious and chillingly powerful. But she was also the backbone of the entire Song Domain. Her thralls were currently besieging the Sword Saints on the battlefield, but in the time of peace, the same thralls were the foundation of the logistical infrastructure in the eastern reaches of the Dream Realm.

With her death, that infrastructure would be disrupted and set back by a decade. Delivering goods from the River of Tears to the inland cities would become many times harder, time-consuming, and dangerous. The same was true for large-scale construction.

So, no matter how frustrated and sickened Sunny felt because of having his mind played with, he ultimately wanted Song Eunbin to survive the battle.

The same went for the other six Saints that were trying to kill him with all their might — each and every one of them was a treasure that he could not really afford to lose. That alone made Sunny feel conflicted, making his reason and instincts clash with each other.

But also…

He was not even sure that he could afford to spare these people. Defeating an enemy while sparing them was much harder than simply killing the enemy, after all. And Sunny was barely managing to keep himself alive in this battle… mercy was a luxury that had a heavy price.

…It was strange.

This was not the first war Sunny had participated in, and definitely not his first battle. However, in the past, he had mostly experienced war from the point of view of a footsoldier. Even as an officer of the Evacuation Army, Sunny had only really needed to concern himself with achieving his objectives.

But now, he was powerful enough and influential enough to be one of the people responsible for setting the objectives. As such, his perspective of war had no choice but to change.

Because war wasn't simply something he had to survive anymore. Instead, it was also a tool to be used in order to attain what he desired.

'How lofty…'

Something inside of him rebelled against the very idea. It was a cynical and revolting thing, to coldly and pragmatically seek benefit in the misery and deaths of countless people. Sunny felt as if he was becoming something that he hated the most.

Was this how the Sovereigns had started to lose their way, decades ago?

Would he become no different from those ghouls one day?

Surely, no…

But having experienced Master Orum's memories, Sunny knew that Ki Song and Anvil had not set out to become misguided tyrants, either.

They had just lost their humanity, one little step at a time.

...Perhaps fortunately, he did not have much time to think.

All he had to do right now was fight.

***

Lonesome Howl... was appalled.

In front of her eyes, some of the strongest warriors of the Song Domain were being toyed with by an impossible monster. She, a fierce huntress who had risen from the very bottom of humanity to its very peak by braving a sea of blood and dread, was being toyed with.

The Lord of Shadows was too powerful.

His demonic body was both human-like and bestial in nature. It was gruesomely flexible and moved with tremendous speed — sometimes upright, sometimes falling to all fours like a ferocious predator. It also possessed dire might, and was encased in a nearly impenetrable onyx shell.

It could leap great distances and pummel the ground with enough force to make the rest of them lose balance. From time to time, it shaped sharp weapons from the shadows, using them to wound or keep Howl and her companions at bay. Those weapons were deadly, but relatively easy to break… and they seem to require a source of shadows to be created.

But the mercenary Saint himself was a source of shadows.

With his four hands, clawed feet, and deceptively perilous tail, the dark demon was managing to fight against a superior number of

enemies on almost equal ground. His combat technique was beautifully refined and supremely adaptable... a Transcendent Battle Art in its truest sense, and an ingenious one at that — something that was supposed to require the resources of an entire clan to create, but was nevertheless in the possession of a lone wolf Saint.

…Worse still, there was something uncanny about how the Lord of Shadows fought. It was as if he always knew what they would do in advance. No matter how unpredictably Lonesome Howls and the other Saints attacked, no matter how flawless and instant their cooperation was, he was always ready to dodge, deflect, and block their blows.

And then punish them.

Even Beastmaster, her sister, seemed powerless to stop the infernal creature. Sure, her Aspect seemed to slow him down somewhat and sap his power, but not nearly enough to bring the Lord of Shadows to his knees.

However... worst of all was the fact that even when they succeeded, shattering his armor and dealing grievous wounds to his towering body…

Those wounds simply healed, and the enemy acted as if nothing had happened.

It was as if he was immortal, while Lonesome Howl herself was already battered and in agony, her black fur soaked with blood.

Her companions were the same.

It was truly… astounding.

They were Saints. And she was not just any Saint, at that — she was a princess of the Song Domain. The blood of Beast God flowed in her veins. She had hunted numerous powerful abominations, conquered three Nightmares, and honed her mind and skill to forge them into a deadly weapon.

The rest of them were the same.

And yet, seven Saints were barely managing to contend against a completely unknown warrior — thirteen Saints, really, if she counted her brothers and sisters who were fighting his strange Echoes.

And that warrior was neither a scion of the Great Clan Valor nor a loyal vassal of the King of Swords. Instead, he was a mere mercenary that Changing Star had convinced to offer his services to her father's Domain.

Another monster, akin to Changing Star herself and the Prince of Nothing.

And speaking of the Prince of Nothing…

Lonesome Howl growled as she threw her battered body into another lunge.

If only that bastard had handled the negotiations with Lord of Shadows better!

If only he had not failed to lure the hermit Saint to the cause of Song… then their Domain might have won the war, already.

How ironic it was, that the war to decide the fate of two worlds — the Realm War — could have been decided by the choice of a single man.

Lonesome Howl managed to distract the Lord of Shadows just long enough for Jack to strike his side with the crescent blade.

The onyx armor parted, and the inky flesh beneath was torn to shreds. A tide of darkness flowed from the terrible wound to the surface of the ancient bone.

…Of course, the wound closed a few moments later.

However, this time, Lonesome Howl noticed something strange.

Why… did it seem that the onyx demon was not as tall and towering as he had been before?

She waited for the enemy to receive another wound, and then, the

red flames burning in her eyes surged.

'I… I see!'

There was no mistake.

Every time the Lord of Shadow healed a wound… the size of his Transcendent form diminished by a small amount.

Almost as if he was using the shadows constituting his enormous body to mend the damage.

Which meant…

That he was not truly immortal, and that his power wasn't truly endless.

It was in limited supply, as well.

Lonesome Howl bared her fangs.

That… she could work with that…

Chapter-2015: Heir of Death

As the battle continued, Sunny felt the pressure mounting.

His towering Shell moved like a hurricane, endlessly besieged by the seven Saints. Lonesome Howl, Saint Ceres, and the Jackal led the harrowing onslaught, never faltering or slowing down. The beautiful harpy, Siord, and the Saint of Sorrow alternated between circling above him and diving down to deliver devastating blows.

Their presence was especially oppressive, because it added an entire new plane to the battle. Even when the winged Saints were not plummeting from the blinding radiance of the sky to attack Sunny, the mere fact that they were somewhere above stifled his movements.

There were Silent Stalker and Beastmaster, as well.

The former was a deadly threat due to how relentless and penetrating her arrows were. She was eerily accurate and elusive, too, never allowing him to get close.

The latter was the source of great hardship. Not only was she controlling countless Nightmare Creatures to tip the balance of the Transcendent battle in favor of the Song Domain, but she was also subjecting Sunny to two different types of mental manipulation at the same time. There was her sling and its explosive shots to deal with, as well.

Sunny's power was slowly dwindling.

He could not allow himself to use the Shadow Lantern — not even because he was wary of the deadly arrows flying out of its stone gate, but because he was wary of the mysterious archer escaping the Shadow Realm.

Who knew what that creature was, and what havoc it would cause

once unleashed upon humanity? Skinwalker was already bad enough, and Sunny did not wish to be responsible for letting another ancient fiend loose in human settlements.

Without the Shadow Lantern, though, his source element was feeble and scarce in this radiant land. He had already used most of the shadows around him to construct the Shadow Shell. Now, with every blow it received, the Shell was consuming itself to repair the damage.

It wasn't going to last much longer… unless he managed to diminish the number of his enemies soon.

But Sunny was still hesitating, unsure if he was willing to kill Saints.

In the end, however... the choice was made for him.

It was shortly after he leaped over the three-headed canine and crouched, using her massive body as a shield against Silent Stalker's arrows.

His tail shot back, piercing her thigh, two of his hands swatted the harpy and the gargoyle away, while a third picked up the corpse of a lumbering Nightmare Creature — one of Beastmaster's thralls who had been slain in the battle between the great armies — and tossed it forward like a cannonball.

The corpse exploded into a geyser of crimson liquid as it hit the Jackal a split second later, cracking a few of his ribs and sending the obsidian giant reeling.

The plan was to follow the toss with another leap, fall upon the staggered Saint, and maim him before Lonesome Howl could slam into Sunny from the side to aid her comrade.

However, just before that…

Sunny sensed a trickle of power flow into his soul.

'A... shadow fragment?'

He froze for a split second, knowing what it meant.

Sunny could put himself in mortal danger in order to attempt to preserve the lives of his enemies… but he couldn't, in good conscience, force his Shadows to do the same.

Somewhere out there, either Saint or Serpent had killed one of their opponents.

Which meant that he already failed.

Transcendent blood had already spilled by his hand, making him not only complicit, but also a hypocrite.

He had managed to keep his hands clean of human blood in this war for too long, already.

Others lacked this privilege, so why would he be any different?

…Sunny only halted for a fraction of a moment, but that moment of hesitation cost him dearly.

He wasn't fast enough to avoid Lonesome Howl, who landed on his back and tore into his shoulder.

And because of being burdened by her immense weight, he wasn't fast enough to dodge Silent Stalker's arrow, either — she had already lept to circumvent Ceres, letting go of the string midair.

The arrow slid into a breach in the Onyx Mantle, pierced his Shell, and sliced his own shadow deep within it.

As his soul was being cut, a familiar, terrible agony blinded Sunny.

Lonesome Howl tore into his shoulder with ferocious power, then jerked her head violently, ripping his entire arm off.

'Ah…'

It was ironic, really.

Sunny had been mentally chastising Rain for hesitating to kill the enemy just a short while ago. And yet, here he was, suffering for doing the same…

The Jackal had already recovered, lunging forward to bring his golden blade down. That polearm of his was a Transcendent Memory of the Seventh Tier… an Aspect Legacy, perhaps. Having already been cut by it a few times, Sunny knew how terrible and inescapable its power was.

But those had only been shallow wounds.

A full-power strike could very well be fatal, even for someone like him.

Time seemed to slow down.

And as it did, the turmoil in Sunny's mind was alleviated.

He was suddenly very calm…

And full of cold, indifferent resolve.

Sunny was crouching on the ground, with Lonesome Howl standing on his back. She had just torn off his upper arm, having used all her strength to do so… therefore, she was still being pulled away from him by inertia.

Her balance wasn't steady.

Sunny went with the momentum and rolled sideways, throwing the monstrous she-wolf down and crushing her with his tremendous weight. The crescent blade whistled past and hit the surface of the ancient bone with a thunderous boom and a powerful shockwave.

Rolling over Lonesome Howl, Sunny was on his fours a moment later. Without wasting even a second, he launched himself into the air, flying at the towering Jackal with tremendous speed.

The obsidian Saint was still leaning forward, grasping the shaft of his golden polearm with both hands. His side was open and defenseless.

Ceres was already lunging into an attack, and two winged Saints were diving down to deliver devastating blows.

Beastmaster sent a swarm of illusions to slow him down.

But Sunny simply ignored them.

The Jackal belatedly shifted his gaze from where Sunny was a moment ago to where Sunny was now. He let go of his polearm with one hand, moving it down to protect his side.

So…

Sunny used one of his three remaining hands to push himself off the ground, and went for the enemy's throat instead.

His onyx claws slashed across it like four enormous blades, leaving thin cuts behind.

A moment later, four tremendous torrents of blood exploded out of the cuts, falling down like a crimson tide.

The towering obsidian jackal staggered, then swayed…

And toppled silently to the ground, making it quake with the heavy impact of his fall.

His throat had been cut, and his spine had been severed.

He was dead.

Chapter-2016: Fallen Saints

As the enormous body of the obsidian giant toppled to the ground, Sunny was already moving away to avoid the retaliation by the remaining six Saints.

Still dazed by the agony of receiving a soul wound, he ground his teeth and whispered something to himself quietly.

Just a few words...

'You have slain a Transcendent Beast.'

His shadow grew stronger.

…The words tasted bitter.

Almost at the same time, there was another trickle of subtle power entering his soul.

Saint and Serpent had claimed one more life.

And just like that, in less than a minute, three human Saints had lost their lives.

'Damn it!'

The fury of the Saints of Song descended upon him like a hurricane. Another arrow found its way into his Shell, shattering its internal structure. A slingshot hit him like a cannonball, exploding with a devastating roar and mangling his entire left side.

Still missing an entire arm and reeling from the pain of his soul being cut, Sunny stumbled.

He righted himself before the giant wolf and the three-headed hound tore into him with their fangs, though. Moving with uncanny

foresight, he dodged their feral, but chillingly precise attacks and dashed back.

His mangled side healed. A new arm emerged from the depths of his towering onyx body…

Only that body was not that towering anymore. In fact, it was barely half as tall as it had been once. Which made aiming for his real incarnation much easier.

But that was fine.

Because for once, time was on Sunny's side — he just had to survive long enough to reap the benefits.

The Saints of Song did not know it… most likely… but he was a Transcendent Terror. Which meant that his reserves of essence were six times deeper than those of his enemies.

Of course, his Aspect was also much more potent — so, usually, Sunny drained his essence at a speed that would make most Saints feel appalled, therefore suffering from having to ration it just as much as everyone else, if not more.

However, not in this battle. With his ability to use Shadow Step stifled by the shattering of space, and his ability to use Shadow Manifestation limited by the lacking number of shadows present on the battlefield, Sunny was not burning through nearly as much essence as he usually did. He only had to maintain and move the Shadow Shell.

But his enemies were in a different situation… especially those who had assumed their Transcendent forms.

So, even though Sunny's Shell was slowly shrinking, their reserves of essence were also diminishing.

Soon, they would have to release their Transformations and return to being human — but he would still be flush with essence at that time, thus gaining a great advantage.

Sunny just had to endure the battle until then.

Doing so while facing six enemies instead of seven was not easy, but it was at least doable.

It would be much better if there were only five, though…

Sunny quickly evaluated the battlefield.

Which one was he going to take out next?

But it was not really up to him. It was up to his enemies.

The first Saint that made a mistake that their allies failed to cover for would be Sunny's next victim.

The battle continued… it was supposed to slow down now that all of them were suffering from wounds and fatigue, having expended oceans of essence, but instead, it only grew more fierce.

Sunny had abandoned all reservations, while the Saints of Song were set aflame by the death of their comrade.

They were skilled, they were valiant, and they were fierce.

And yet, the six of them were still unable to bring the single enemy down...

Because their enemy was the Lord of Shadows.

The barrage of attacks continued, and Sunny continued to dodge, deflect, and block them. Now that his Shell was smaller and carried less mass, it was becoming more difficult for him to withstand the dire power of Lonesome Howl and the primal ferocity of Saint Ceres.

At the same time, he was harder to pin down or target with ranged attacks… most importantly, though, there was one less enemy for him to contend against.

The Jackal had been the most massive of the seven Saints, and had wielded a long polearm to boot. His absence on the battlefield was a real boon, making it much easier for Sunny to move.

…Of course, the body of the slain Saint was already rising from the

ground, turning its hollow eyes in Sunny's direction. But both his gigantic form and his crescent blade were gone… now, he was merely a Transcendent puppet of the Raven Queen.

Powerful, but not nearly as dangerous as the man himself had been.

Sunny destroyed the puppet easily, letting it drown in the storm of devastation summoned by the clash of Saints.

And just after that, his patience paid off. He received an opportunity to take out another enemy.

However, this one was an enemy Sunny felt most reluctant to kill.

The Saint of Sorrow…

The stone gargoyle had misjudged his increased speed, missing the attack by a few meters. In and of itself, it was not that lethal of a mistake… however, both Lonesome Howl and Ceres were recovering their balance after performing devastating lunges, while Silent Stalker and Beastmaster were moving to get a better shot at the lightning-fast onyx demon.

Even Siord, the gargoyle's partner, was a step behind and too far to do anything instantly.

Which gave Sunny a perfect opportunity to catch the Saint of Sorrow in his fist… he had four of those, after all.

And once the gargoyle was caught, his stone body could be destroyed in a hundred different ways.

But the Saint of Sorrow… was Tamar's father.

Could Sunny really kill the father of his sister's closest friend?

He had already decided to be merciless, after all...

However, he also spent quite some time with Rain's cohort… he had even saved their lives after the winter solstice. These kids weren't strangers to him, either — not by a long shot. He was quite fond of them.

And although Sunny did not really know the Saint of Sorrow, the man enjoyed some of that fondness simply for having raised Tamar into who she was — an upright, loyal, and frustratingly serious young woman who had once jumped into a dark abyss to save the life of a simple porter.

Most importantly of all, hurting Tamar would hurt Rain.

And that weighed on Sunny heavier than the need to preserve the lives of the Saints for the benefit of humanity.

He allowed himself a split second of hesitation…

And then, he lashed out with one of his hands.

Instead of catching the gargoyle in an iron grip, he batted him down.

The blow itself was terrible enough for a net of cracks to appear on the stone body of the Saint of Sorrow, shattering his wings. And a moment later, the gargoyle crashed into the ancient bone with terrible force, causing a small shockwave to roll outward from the point of impact.

The enemy would not be rising from the ground any time soon… but although his wounds were severe, he would live.

Sunny did not spare the Saint of Sorrow out of pure sentiment, though.

Definitely not.

He just didn't want to bother destroying the tough stone body of the gargoyle completely, and by sparing the enemy Saint, he would not have to deal with another puppet of the Queen of Worms a few seconds later.

In any case, it was done.

Now, only five enemies remained.

And Sunny already knew which one he would target next.

He turned slightly and let out a growl...

By then, his gaze had already locked on the bewitching figure of Beastmaster.

Chapter-2017: A Proper Backstab

Sunny knew that what stood between him and victory was Beastmaster.

She alone was the cause of most of his hardship in this calamitous battle. The enchantress was neither as ferocious as Lonesome Howl nor as perilous as Silent Stalker — in fact, in comparison, she was not much of a warrior. She was still a Saint, of course, and thus a deadly fighter. But one that was weaker than the rest of them in combat.

And yet, her power was the most terrifying.

Even Sunny was far from his usual self, despite his formidable mental fortitude. He was slower and weaker, barely managing to contend with the furious onslaught of attacks by the seven… five Saints, now.

All across the battlefield, devastating forces were being unleashed, and Transcendent blood was being spilled. Most of these warriors — the strength and pride of humanity — were faring worse than Sunny.

But he wasn't doing so well, either.

Despite his calmness and cold resolve, Sunny was feeling the effects of having been in this dreadful battle for so long, too.

So, he had to eliminate Beastmaster soon.

The problem was that his enemies knew how important she was, too.

They never let him get close to her.

The enchantress herself moved around the battlefield with graceful steps, always remaining out of his reach. The other four Saints were

like an impenetrable wall separating the two of them — no matter how dire their own situation was, they always made sure to guard the approach to Beastmaster well.

If Sunny dared to make her his target, he would have to sacrifice a lot to break through that wall. And by the time he reached where Beastmaster had been, she would have already moved away.

It was a stalemate.

But Sunny believed in his resourcefulness more than he despaired at the sight of the five enraged Saints.

He would have been quite happy if they had at least lost some of their discernment due to the rage… but his enemies remained in full control of themselves. It was worse than that, even.

They seem to be adapting to his ability to predict their movements. It was happening slowly, but undeniably — the Saints of Song were deconstructing the foundation of their battle strategy and assembling a new one on the fly.

The longer the battle dragged on, the more often Sunny found himself in situations where even knowing what the enemy would do could not save him from being harmed.

They simply built their assaults in a way that left him no way to escape. With five sources of peril, it was not too difficult to build a cage that Sunny could not break out of despite knowing where its bars were and would be.

His Shell continued to shrink, growing smaller faster and faster.

At the same time, the essence of the enemy Saints continued to dwindle.

And at some point…

The beautiful harpy let out a loud call and plummeted from the sky. This time, however, it was not to deliver a deadly attack or add momentum to one of her destructive javelins — instead, she landed on the battlefield in a whirlwind of wings and talons, and turned into

an alluring woman a moment later.

Sadly, Sunny did not receive a chance to attack her in the short period of vulnerability caused by the transition… because he was paying for opening himself to an enemy attack, too.

His Shell was in rough shape, and he had stopped mending the damage dealt to it not long before — if he had continued, Lonesome Howl and Ceres would actually gain an advantage over him in terms of mass.

He had successfully pushed the three-headed canine back and sacrificed a piece of flesh to deliver the monstrous she-wolf another shallow cut. By now, her fur was just as much red as it was black, but the feral princess did not seem to have lost any of her dire power... the opposite, in fact.

Sunny failed to disengage fast enough, which left him open for a split second too long.

And in that split second, Silent Stalker's arrow hit him straight in the chest.

The internal frame of the Shadowspawn Shell had already been severely damaged, and this last blow seemed like the last drop.

The entire torso of the onyx demon exploded, turning into a wave of shadows. The shadows fell to the ground like black smoke, dissolving into nothingness. Behind the river of dissipating darkness, what remained of the fearsome creature crumbled, as well.

Leaving only a battered human figure laying on the ground.

Sunny grimaced, then rolled, dodging another arrow, and jumped to his feet.

The illusory pain that had been searing his mind was suddenly more unbearable. The tranquil presence blooming in his heart was suddenly more breathtaking, making it harder to resist its tender call.

'Argh… dammit…'

His armor was cracked and broken, and his stance was hunched.

Nevertheless, he… the Lord of Shadows… did not look any less fearsome in his battered state.

If anything, he looked more dangerous than ever, like a beast who had been backed into a corner.

The enemies surrounded him, ready to attack. Now that Sunny was back to human form, he had to crane his neck to look at the giant figures of Lonesome Howl and Ceres… from this point of view, the two towering beasts looked quite terrifying.

The harpy, Siord, was ready to join the melee in her human form, too.

Somewhere behind him, Silent Stalker was drawing her bow.

And somewhere in front of him, behind the wall of three deadly Saints, Beastmaster was spinning her sling in the distance.

Things… did not look good for Sunny.

He grinned behind Weaver's Mask.

And spoke with a hint of cold contempt in his elusive voice:

"Gods. This… was not part of the plan."

Lonesome Howl growled and leaned forward, ready to lunge at him in a hurricane of fangs and primal fury.

But almost at the same time…

A swift shadow that had stealthily fled when the Shadowspawn Shell turned into a tide of darkness finally reached its goal.

Another figure wearing the fearsome onyx armor rose from the shadows behind Beastmaster, not making any noise.

A moment later…

The cold blade of a black stiletto brushed against her neck, making

the enchantress shiver.

She froze, unable to move.

And then, a cold voice resounded from behind her:

"I really can't believe… that I finally managed to do something like a proper assassin, for once in my goddamn life…"

With that, something slammed into the back of her head, and the world turned dark.

Chapter-2018: Death Incarnate

Sunny had figured out that taking out Beastmaster would not be easy, so he employed a bit of subterfuge.

Allowing his shrinking Shell to crumble sooner than it would have otherwise, he used the resulting tide of shadows to send one of his incarnations away unnoticed.

His strength diminished, and the pressure on his mind increased as the shadow fled — not enough to break him, but enough to make him sway.

He used the Lord of Shadows to draw the attention of Lonesome Howl, Silent Stalker, Ceres, and Siord — just enough for the stealthy incarnation to reach Beastmaster. Then, he emerged from the shadows, manifested a sharp stiletto, and pressed it against her neck.

At this point… he was actually unsure what to do.

Taking the beautiful enchantress hostage had seemed like a good idea before, but now that he was standing next to her, barely lucid under the assault of her Aspect, Sunny realized that she was far too dangerous to keep alive.

Or at least conscious.

He hesitated for a moment, wanting to kill her, but knowing that her death would be too great of a loss. He really did not know what choice was the right one.

But there was no time to think, so he simply went with the option that was not irreversible.

If he really wanted to, he could always kill Beastmaster later. However, bringing her back from the dead seemed like a very

troublesome task.

Pulling the blade of the stiletto away, he brought his heavy gauntlet down on the back of her head.

There was a heavy thud, and the bewitching Saint crumbled to the ground like a doll that had her strings cut.

Sunny looked at her with regret... then smiled naughtily behind his mask.

"...Look at that. Princess Beastmaster, groveling at my feet. Should I tell Rain?"

His smile did not linger for long, though. As it dimmed, he glanced in the direction of his haughty avatar.

Now, he just had to deal with the remaining four Saints.

***

Lonesome Howl could smell it…

Victory.

Today, victory smelled of blood, senseless death, and regret. But its smell was nevertheless sweet.

The damned monster had finally run out of essence. His towering Transcendent form steadily diminished in size… at first. Then, the speed at which it mended itself slowed, finally coming to a halt. And a few moments ago, the onyx demon finally crumbled, turning into a tide of darkness.

Now, all that remained was a small, battered man.

The Lord of Shadows still looked formidable, though.

His fearsome armor was breached and broken in many places, and yet, there was not even a single drop of blood flowing from the breaches. It was as if there was no human body underneath at all… just more darkness, more shadow.

His cold and arrogant demeanor had not changed, either, despite the fact that five of them were surrounding him from all sides.

The Lord of Shadows still had some strength left.

But it was hopeless.

What can one man do against five Transcendent beings?

Without the size and mass of his demonic Transformation, he had no hope of facing all of them alone. Not today, at least.

Just a moment before they lunged forward to rip him apart, the Lord of Shadows suddenly spoke in his indifferent, cold voice:

"Gods. This… was not part of the plan."

His words seemed to indicate despair, but his tone was anything but desperate.

Suddenly, Lonesome Howl felt an ominous chill.

And then, her long ears flicked, the fur on her back standing on its end.

That was because she heard something that should have been impossible.

Another voice… coming from somewhere far behind.

Spinning around, she witnessed a scene that made her heart turn to ice.

Bin was falling to the ground, bright blood flowing down her back.

And there, above her… stood another figure clad in fearsome onyx armor, his white hair dancing in the wind.

He was almost exactly like the man standing calmly in front of her. Only his mask seemed subtly different, and slightly less eerie.

'What…'

Why… why were there two of them?

"Don't bother… she's dead."

His indifferent voice cut her like a blade.

Whipping her head back, Lonesome Howl stared at the Lord of Shadow… the original one… in stunned silence.

Then, she let out a terrible roar and lunged forward.

The other three — Silence, Siord, and Ceres — followed her with murderous determination.

It was just that…

As soon as they moved, the shadows of their enemy moved, as well. And a split second later, two more Lords of Shadows were standing side by side with the first one.

These ones wore onyx helmets with white plumes instead of the ferocious mask, darkness nestling in their visors… they looked eerily similar to the graceful Echo of the Lord of Shadows, one that commanded true darkness and had faced Revel at Vanishing Lake.

And just like that, their numerical advantage was gone.

Everything was gone.

Even as she threw her bleeding body at the enemy, Lonesome Howl couldn't help but shiver.

That Echo…

Was it an Echo of a human Saint?

Was that an Echo… of the Lord of Shadows himself?

Had he killed himself and risen from the dead like a vengeful wraith?

Or was it no Echo at all?

Were all of them — the Lord, the Knight, the Fiend, the Serpent —

merely various forms that one dark creature took to pursue its sinister goals?

Lonesome Howl did not know.

But she suddenly felt fear.

***

If Sunny knew what the princess of Song was thinking about, he would be amused.

And a little sad.

After all, he had hoped that people would stop confusing him with Saint — who was a woman! — after the memory of him was erased from the world.

However, he did not know, and had no time to care.

He still had four Saints to defeat.

Yes, the Saints of Song were wounded and running low on essence, while Sunny was relatively unscathed and had more essence than he could burn at the moment. And yes, they did not have the advantage of numbers anymore.

But he was not going to relax.

That was how people got killed — by allowing themselves to become arrogant when victory was already in sight.

Lonesome Howl and Silent Stalker were daughters of Ki Song, and they had to have a few deadly surprises left, without a doubt. Perhaps powerful Memories… perhaps more drops of their mother's blood.

Something was going to go wrong, for sure — or all of it.

His task was to win even if everything went wrong.

His three avatars clashed with Lonesome Howl, Ceres, and Siord. The

fourth avatar, meanwhile, dashed forward to intercept Silent Stalker.

And as he fought with four bodies, making them move as one…

Something in his mind clicked.

Even consumed by the fervor of battle, Sunny couldn't help but smile.

It was all coming together.

His Transcendent Battle Art was finally going to be complete.

Chapter-2019: Reaching the Peak

Sunny had been developing his Transcendent Battle Art for a long time now.

A Transcendent Battle Art was the culmination of one's combat technique. Humans underwent a profound transformation when becoming Saints — therefore, their technique had to reach its own version of Transcendence, as well.

On a surface level, a Transcendent Battle Art was an elevation of a battle style to a technique that comprehensively fit the newfound powers of a Saint. Of course, since all Aspects were unique, each such Battle Art was fundamentally different from the rest.

On a deeper level, however, the difference between a mundane battle style and a Transcendent Battle Art was enormously vast. A Transcendent being was, by definition, one that had crossed the threshold separating mortals from deities — therefore, Saints wielded powers that were truly beyond the scope of humanly possible.

A combat technique that flawlessly incorporated these powers had a special nature. It transcended the definition of a battle style just as much as Saints transcended mere mortals.

Hence, the name.

It was not at all surprising, then, that developing a Transcendent Battle Art was a daunting task. It was already difficult enough to disassemble the very nature of a martial style into elementary principles — but then, these axiomatic principles had to be examined, reshaped, or even dismissed entirely, to be replaced with new concepts.

Finally, a comprehensive system of practical applications had to be built on this new foundation. An impossible and revolutionary battle style meant to be used by only a single person.

No wonder it took the talent and resources of an entire Legacy Clan to design a single Transcendent Battle Art… Sunny, however, had done it alone.

He had meticulously created a completely new set of concepts and laws of how a living being was supposed to fight, based on his own unique attributes and abilities instead of human nature.

His Transcendent Battle Art had been on the verge of completion for a while. The theoretical foundation had already been developed, and all he lacked was practical experience to test his design in order to either validate or iterate it.

He had tested and perfected most of it already. But one key element was still unfinished — because that element concerned controlling multiple incarnations in battle, and Sunny had been hiding that Ability of his for a long time.

He had fought some Nightmare Creatures that way in the past, but only now that he was facing a foe as dire, cunning, and skilled as the four Saints of the Song Domain did he receive a bountiful opportunity to really test his mettle.

Everything was clicking together. Everything was falling into place.

Sunny could feel it…

His art was taking shape.

From that first swing of the Azure Blade Nephis had instructed him to perform on the Forgotten Shore to this calamitous battle under the radiant sky of Godgrave, Sunny had never stopped reaching for new heights.

And now, finally, he was standing on the peak.

His art was complete.

…The four Saints descended upon Sunny like a hurricane of fangs, claws, and sharp steel. However, all that met them was darkness and overwhelming strength.

Now that Sunny did not have to create titanic blades to wield with the giant hands of his Shell, four weapons manifested themselves in his four pairs of hands. They were an austere tachi, a great odachi, a somber spear, and an elegant jian.

Each was as potent as a Transcendent weapon would have been, and sharp enough to cut the world.

His four bodies moved in perfect harmony with each other, weaving a dark tapestry of deadly intent. The flawless grace of their unity made the uncanny combat affinity that the seasoned warriors serving the King of Swords displayed seem clumsy and crude, full of dissonance and discord.

Even the four Saints of Song, whose ability to cooperate in combat had been forged in thousands of battles, were no match.

And so… Sunny crushed them.

Each of his four bodies was weaker than one augmented body had been, but the sum of their individual strength was greater than the whole. He could be in several places at the same time, seamlessly interweave offense and defense, build elaborate traps, force the enemy to move where he wanted them to move… all with almost effortless ease.

The possibilities seemed endless.

Best of all, the four Saints were almost like an open book to him. Now that Sunny's own Transcendent Battle Art was complete, he found it easier to read similar techniques that belonged to others. His already formidable mastery of Shadow Dance took another leap, teasing him with an alluring scent of unknown mysteries.

He could vaguely feel what lay beyond…

For Shadow Dance, the ability to mimic the Attributes of other living beings.

For his Battle Art… the ability to incorporate his will into the movements of his sword.

Just like the nebulous archer of the Shadow Realm had incorporated death into the black arrows.

Even in the rush of battle, Sunny could not help but notice that there was a common trait between these two future breakthroughs.

It was that… neither was truly only about combat.

In fact, he could not even call the next evolution of his technique a Supreme Battle Art. Because it was not really a technique, or limited to battle.

It was just what being Supreme meant.

And just like that, a seed of a different kind of understanding was planted in Sunny's mind.

…The furious assault by the four Saints shattered against the elusive barrier woven by his four incarnations. The battle continued at a frenetic pace, but he maintained a calm and chillingly cold attitude, silently pushing the enemies to their limit — and then past it. Soon, the Saints of Song reached a point where their reserves of essence were almost depleted.

Of course, there were a few perilous moments on the way. Sunny had been right — the daughters of Ki Song were indeed harboring a few weapons of last resort.

But it was already too late. Sunny had too great of an advantage. His superiority was both oppressive and suffocating — even when they called upon their trump cards, he managed to deal with the consequences with relative ease.

Especially because those carefully prepared countermeasures were meant to deal with a single powerful opponent, not four. And because Beastmaster had been taken out of the fight before having an opportunity to summon her own.

Eventually, it all came crashing down for the Saints of Song.

The beautiful harpy, Siord, screamed and fell to the ground, grasping a terrible wound. Sunny moved away to deflect an attack by Saint Ceres, but a moment later, another of his incarnations was standing in his place. The elegant jian rose and fell, slicing Siord's tendons and removing her from the battle.

The three-headed canine was next. Sunny was cruel in dealing with her… isolating Ceres from the daughters of Ki Song with three avatars, he leaped into the air and brandished his great odachi. The dark blade flashed twice, and two of her three heads fell to the ground.

Then, it was just Lonesome Howl and Silent Stalker against his four incarnations.

The daughters of Ki Song fought beautifully. They fought valiantly.

But in the end, they still lost.

And just when Lonesome Howl, having long returned to her human form, fell to her knees, feeling the tip of his sword at her neck…

A low, reverberating sound rolled across the vast battlefield.

Sunny stayed his hand and looked up.

His fearsome mask did not reveal any emotion, but somehow, he looked slightly amused.

He recognized that sound.

'...They are calling retreat.'

Chapter-2020: One Man's Greed

Soon after the first rumbling call of the war horn, another one resounded, rolling across the battlefield like a tidal wave. Sunny was momentarily impressed by the logistical preparations that had been undertaken to wage this war… after all, it was not easy to drown out the deafening clamor of a Transcendent battle.

Which meant that both armies had prepared tools capable of delivering the commands to hundreds of thousands of clashing soldiers in advance.

It wasn't that surprising, really. Both Valor and Song had rich experience subjugating wild regions of the Dream Realm, after all. They would have known how to signal to their troops when besieged by hordes of roaring Nightmare Creatures.

In any case…

He realized how tired he was by catching his mind wandering.

The sound of two horns told Sunny everything he needed to know, at the moment.

The first horn had come from the position of the Song Army… which meant that the battle was over, and that the Sword Army had delivered the enemy a crushing defeat.

The second horn had come from the direction of the towering Echo — perhaps it was no horn at all, but simply the bellow of the gargantuan creature. Its meaning was also quite clear.

The King of Swords was ordering them not to pursue.

With his expression hidden behind Weaver's Mask, Sunny let out a quiet sigh of relief.

Ki Song calling for retreat meant that the Saints of the Song Army were beaten despite their great numerical advantage. Anvil ordering his own Saints to stand down… probably meant that he did not wish to cross the Queen's bottom line just yet.

And that he was already satisfied with the result.

'...We've won, then.'

Sunny still couldn't quite believe it.

He knew that he had won, of course. He was also certain that Nephis would have demolished her share of enemies. Cassie would be alright, too… she always was.

But, still. Twenty-three Saints defeating twice as many enemy Transcendents sounded… implausible.

But the proof was impossible to deny.

Everywhere he looked, the remaining pilgrims were turning around and slowly heading away from the battlefield.

He could see a few battered Saints staggering away, as well.

Which brought him to a dilemma.

Still holding the tip of his odachi to Lonesome Howl's neck, Sunny stared at her through the eyes of Weaver's Mask.

…What was he supposed to do now that he had won?

The Jackal was dead. Beastmaster and the Ceres were unconscious. Siord and the Saint of Sorrow were too terribly wounded to mount any resistance. Silent Stalker was on the ground, three of his incarnations standing above her with weapons drawn and ready to strike.

Lonesome Howl was on her knees, at his mercy.

She was not moving, just staring at him from below with defeat, fear, and bitter fury burning in her wild eyes. Her face was pale and

bloodied, and she was gritting her teeth to suppress a pained groan.

'Am I meant to just let them go?'

It seemed quite unfair, to let his prey walk free. Nothing was going to stop these Saints from recovering and joining the next battle, after all…

At the same time, Sunny could not very well take them prisoner. How was he supposed to imprison Saints? Even if he tied them up and locked them in the Nameless Temple, they could simply flee back to the waking world. No amount of chains and locks could stop them.

He was certain that Anvil could. The King of Swords had imprisoned Orum, after all… so, there was some kind of runic prison already established here in Godgrave.

But did Sunny really want to give the Sovereign hostages of royal blood?

No way. If he did, he would be responsible for whatever atrocity Anvil decided to perpetrate toward the prisoners.

So, Sunny only had two choices.

Either finish the defeated Saints right here and now… or let them go.

And he had not kept them alive only to slaughter them once the battle was over.

Of course… Lonesome Howl and the rest of the Saints of Song must have thought differently.

Judging by their gazes, they seemed to be under the illusion that Sunny was some kind of unholy monster.

No, really… did they have to look so petrified?

'All that after I went out of my way to be gentle…'

Shaking his head mentally, Sunny sighed, then retracted his odachi and pointed in the direction of the distant Song Army.

When he spoke, his voice was cold and indifferent:

"...Leave."

Lonesome Howl stared at him, her bloodied face growing even paler.

Strangely enough, she made no motion to rise from her knees.

Instead, she gritted her teeth even tighter, and then spat:

"Why… are you letting us go?"

Sunny looked down at her, feeling perplexed.

He would have already been running in her shoes.

Still, he had to come up with an answer…

Blaming everything on Nephis again would be unwise — the King of Swords could very well be listening, after all, and learning that his daughter had secretly ordered his most powerful fighter to spare the enemy elites could very well cause dire problems down the line.

And after today, there would be no question of who the most powerful member of the Sword Army outside the royal family was, without a doubt.

So what was Sunny supposed to say?

...Luckily, this incarnation of his was wearing Weaver's Mask.

Eventually, he shrugged and answered evenly:

"I am just a hired blade. My pay is high, but not high enough to start a blood feud with the Queen of Song."

Meaning…

'You are a princess, and I am a simple mercenary. I'm not crazy enough and can't be bothered to kill Ki Song's daughters, thus giving her a reason to personally hunt me down!'

On second thought, that also implied that Sunny would actually be

willing to do something like that if the pay was high enough.

He hoped that Lonesome Howl would miss that.

She stared at him for a few moments, then suddenly let out a bitter, hollow laugh.

"So that's the reason? I can't… I can't believe it. A hired blade! The outcome of the battle, the fate of the entire world… might just depend on something as base as one man's greed?"

Sunny looked at her silently for a while.

Then, he leaned his head back and laughed.

His laugh sounded eerie and sinister, rolling across the ravaged battlefield like a chilling wind.

"Why? Do you think that we are that different?"

Shaking his head, he looked at the kneeling princess and added with a hint of disdain in his calm, cold voice:

"No. The King of Valor, your mother, and I... we are exactly the same. It's just that they are greedy for more tasteless things."

With that, Sunny took a step back and dissolved into the shadows.

Lonesome Howl was left standing on her knees in solitude.

The echo of his sinister laughter, and of his piercing words, was still ringing in her ears.

Chapter-2021: End of the Battle

A similar situation was happening elsewhere on the battlefield.

There, a vast swath of the sun-bleached bone had been scorched by incinerating flames and turned black. It almost seemed as if it had been on the verge of igniting, angry red sparks and wisps of smoke still escaping from somewhere below.

The air was heavy with the smell of smoke, and white flames danced here and there on the charred remains of thralls and pilgrims.

This was where Nephis had fought Seishan, Death Singer, and the five Saints supporting them.

The battle had been fierce.

Seishan was powerful, and her power had only grown exponentially on a bloodsoaked battlefield. Death Singer seemed to possess some form of authority over blood, as well, both using it for offense and to boost her sister's already formidable prowess even further.

The five Saints that had come to join the Queen's daughters were not weak in any way, either.

However, it had all been for naught.

Once Nephis truly unleashed her flames and burned away the blood that had been spilled upon the ancient bone by the Awakened soldiers, Seishan and Death Singer found themselves at a disadvantage.

The Saints that had been supposed to slow Changing Star down did everything they were expected to do. Their Aspects worked well together, and they worked especially well against someone like her.

A carefully designed combination of powerful Memories enveloped the last daughter of the Immortal Flame clan in a net of insidious enchantments.

The thralls and the pilgrims descended upon her like a plague.

And yet…

None of it worked.

Nephis broke free of the net, withstood the barrage of melee and ranged attacks unleashed by the five Saints, turned the thralls and the pilgrims into ash, and faced the two daughters of Ki Song like a radiant, harrowing spirit of flame.

Her skill, power, and absolute resolve were overwhelming.

The Saints of Song were shocked and dismayed.

Then, a hint of fear entered their hearts.

Even Death Singer seemed shaken by the ferocious might of Changing Star...

Only Seishan did not seem that surprised.

After all, she had witnessed who Nephis was, and what she could do, all the way back on the Forgotten Shore.

In fact, she understood clearly that Changing Star was holding back her most destructive powers.

The only thing she could not understand was…

Why?

Was it out of a sense of empty sentimentality?

No, the young woman she had come to know in the Dark City was not someone who could be swayed by such emotions.

So why, then?

A subtle frown twisted Seishan's exquisite brow.

In the end, the result of the clash between Changing Star and the seven Saints of Song was quite predictable.

By the time the Song Army sounded retreat, all seven of them were beaten and battered, in agony, and barely clinging to life...

And yet, they were alive.

The blinding light of the radiant figure dimmed, and in a whirlwind of sparks, a pristine white tunic covered her slender body. Changing Star, the last daughter of the Immortal Flame, looked at them with emotionless eyes.

The lovely young woman with beautiful silver hair wore no armor and wielded no weapons. Pure and untainted by the blood and soot of the battlefield, she looked like a heavenly being… breathtaking and completely out of place in this sweltering, dark hell.

Not at all like the unstoppable monster who had ruthlessly crushed, burned, and broken them all.

Only her striking grey eyes betrayed the inhuman coldness of the incandescent white void hiding in her soul.

Seishan suppressed a groan, staring at her own charred body.

It was time to retreat…

In shame and dishonor.

Not everyone knew how to retreat gracefully, though.

One of them — the young Saint of the Maharana clan — looked up at Changing Star and asked in a hoarse, trembling voice:

"...Why didn't you kill me?"

She looked down at him, no emotion visible in her cold grey eyes.

After a few moments of silence, Nephis simply shrugged.

"Because you are not my enemy."

With that, she turned around and left with light steps.

The young man seemed confused, failing to understand the meaning of her words.

Seishan's frown, however, deepened slightly.

Somewhere else on the battlefield…

Three bleeding corpses were laying on the ground, staring at Saint Jest with empty eye sockets. The old man wiped his bloody hands on the shirt of one of them, then clicked his tongue and crushed the head of the other when the corpse attempted to rise.

Looking at his once again bloodied hand with a squeamish expression, he shook his head with a wry smile.

"That girl… still playing house, at her age. Someone should really remind her that dolls are for children."

With that, he looked up with a wondering look.

"Oh… right. I should check on Little Mercy and see how he is doing. Today must have been tough on him…"

Humming a lively melody under his nose, Saint Jest straightened, stretched his back, then picked up his cane and walked away.

Someplace else…

A pile of scrap metal slowly unfurled itself and rose from the ground. Fiend was in a terrible shape, his steel body hideously shredded and torn apart so viciously that it resembled an abstract sculpture.

Fighting the Chain Wyrms had not been an good fit for him, especially with some of his powers sealed by the shattering of space.

Raising one of his remaining hands, the ravenous Shadow used a sharp claw to fish a piece of melting glass from between his fangs and stared in the direction where the two remaining Reflections had gone

with a hateful expression.

A few moments later, a sound that resembled the low roar of spreading flame resounded from his fiery maw:

"Wrrrretches…"

In that moment, Fiend made a decision.

He was going to tell on them… to Big Sister!

Not too far away, Saint retracted her darkness and watched indifferently as her one remaining enemy limped away.

Serpent, however, was surrounded only by silence.

Because all of its enemies were dead.

Just like that, the battle was over.

But its aftershocks were destined to spread far and wide, shaping many of the things that were to come.

Chapter-2022: Overwhelming Strength

The battle that would have cost humanity countless lives ended costing it… slightly less.

The losses among the Awakened soldiers were still quite severe, but at the same time, there weren't nearly as many deaths as there would have been if Nephis had not intervened, ordering the two great armies to retreat and provoking a clash between the Saints instead.

The final, titanic confrontation had decided the outcome of the battle…

It ended with a resounding victory for the Sword Domain.

Sunny somehow expected to be met by endless chants of glory once he returned to the camp of the Sword Army, but in reality, it was just as quiet and subdued as the camp of the defeated side.

That was because most of the soldiers had been brutalized by the unfathomable horror of the calamitous battle, and many of them had lost friends and companions to its hungry maw, as well.

The casualties among the soldiers were still being tallied, but everyone knew how many Saints had returned from the battlefield alive, already.

The results were… surprising.

At least to Sunny.

Four of the Saints of the Sword Army had died.

However, thirteen Saints of the Song Domain perished in return.

Six of them had been killed by Sunny and his Shadows. Three were killed by Old Man Jest. The rest had fallen in individual duels.

A… horrifying number.

Nephis had killed none.

Which was bitterly ironic. Sunny had always considered himself to be… the more humane of the two of them. In fact, in the past, he often felt that Neph's ambition and obsession were dragging him along into the depths where he would not have gone himself. But here he was, having slaughtered almost a full cohort of Transcendent champions, while she had shown restraint and mercy, killing nobody.

Granted, the Song Army had only sent seven Saints after her, as well as a swarm of thralls and pilgrims — while Sunny had technically faced thirteen of them, as well as three of Mordret's Reflections.

He did not know whether he should feel flattered, appalled, proud, or dejected.

That was not important at the moment, anyway.

What was important, though…

Made Sunny shiver.

Song had possessed an overwhelming advantage over the Sword Domain. And yet, their defeat was crushing. Even though Sunny and Nephis had played a vital role in the victory of the Sword Army, the fact remained.

Twenty-six Saints of Song fought against twenty-one Sword Saints, and most of them had lost. Relatively few of the defeated Saints had died, managing to retreat in time, but it was still a startling result.

A result that could mean only one thing…

The Saints of the Sword Army were simply stronger.

And this, in turn, revealed a rather disturbing truth to Sunny.

It shone light on the previously inscrutable demeanor of Anvil, the King of Swords.

From the very beginning… well, maybe from the day Mordret had annihilated the House of Night… the Sovereign of Valor was confusing Sunny with his indifference, inaction, and passive nonchalance.

The Queen of Worms seemed to outplay her enemy on every turn. Her strategies were more elaborate, her ingenious schemes more impactful, her grasp of the battle theater more worthy of a Supreme.

In fact, as time had gone by, the strategic position of the Sword Army started to look more and more hopeless. The enemy was winning virtually on all fronts.

It was to the point that one had no choice but to start doubting which of the two Supremes had inherited the lineage of War God. Wasn't Valor supposed to display a genius of all things having to do with warfare instead of Song?

But the answer to that imbalance was now both evident and undeniable.

It was as if Anvil had told the world today:

"Look and despair. It doesn't matter how cunning, wise, and valiant you are. The most ingenious stratagems are pointless in the face of overwhelming strength."

Anvil had not been bothered by the successes of the Song Domain, because he possessed the only thing he needed to win this war.

A better army, and more deadly champions.

It was a cruel and disheartening lesson.

The bleak reality of this brutal truth was not what unnerved Sunny, though.

Rather, it was the fact that Anvil only possessed overwhelming force because of Nephis and Sunny himself.

Which meant that he had included their strength into his calculations…

Which, in turn, meant that he understood what they were capable of far better than Sunny had assumed.

In fact…

He truly felt a chill run down his spine when thinking about how the battle had transpired.

The clash of the Transcendents only happened because Nephis had defied Anvil's order.

But it was precisely her defiance that had led to the crushing defeat of the Song Domain.

So…

Had the King of Swords calculated that she would disobey him, and even the precise manner in which she would express her disobedience?

He had to. Otherwise, his silent assent to Neph's defiance could hardly be explained.

…This was what frightened Sunny the most.

He looked in the direction of the gargantuan Echo, suddenly feeling tense and uncomfortable.

Almost afraid.

It was as if he was in the palm of Anvil's hand, ready to be crushed in an iron fist at any moment.

His face behind Weaver's Mask grew somber.

Countless humans were dead, including seventeen Saints — a dire loss for all humanity.

The fortunes of the Song Army were reversed in an instant. It had

gone from holding a solid advantage to being hopelessly outmatched by the enemy in the span of one battle — not the least because Sunny and Nephis had revealed a large part of their true power.

The battle had put an end to Song's advance into the depths of the Breastbone Reach. On the contrary, they would have to retreat now, perhaps even being pushed all the way to the Collarbone Plain.

In the worst case, the main camp or even the sole Citadel of the Song Army would be besieged before either Revel or Gilead completed their expeditions.

But for now, the tired, terrified soldiers needed to rest.

The wounded had to be treated, and the dead had to be burned.

Both army camps were abuzz with whispers and discussions of the dreadful battle.

And, of course, two people were mentioned more than all the rest.

Merciful Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan…

And the ruthless, terrifying Lord of Shadows.

Chapter-2023: The Shadow of Godgrave

People did not often see Saints fight… at least in the past.

Of course, the soldiers of the two great armies had witnessed their Transcendent generals clash with dreadful Nightmare Creatures countless times, by now. However, just like the rest of humanity, they had not been exposed to the chilling sight of demigods fighting each other.

Their ignorance had been destroyed today.

The calamitous battle between the great armies was unprecedented as far as the quantity of the Awakened soldiers involved was concerned. However, what followed next was different from all previous battles of human history in quality.

Even safely hidden away from the battlefield, the Awakened warriors had witnessed the awe and horror of a Transcendent battle in all its devastating and harrowing glory.

It was not surprising that the soldiers could not help but discuss it once the fighting stopped. Both camps were overflowing with hushed conversations, the Awakened from the different parts of the battle line sharing the stories of what they had seen.

The duels between individual Saints were already astounding enough.

But it was two clashes in particular that went beyond the realm of what humans had believed was possible.

Obviously, the name of Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan was on everyone's lips… after all, she had delivered all the soldiers from the hellish nightmare of the harrowing battle with her radiant

light. Countless people owed their lives to her — some by benefit of retreating from the fight unscathed, and some quite literally, having been brought back from the brink of death by her soothing flames.

Therefore, the tale of Lady Nephis healing an entire army was spreading like a flame.

The story of her bringing the battle to a halt and sending the soldiers back to face the enemy in personal combat instead was spreading, as well.

And, of course, the story of her facing and defeating seven Saints in battle.

However, that last part was not being discussed that widely, despite how astonishing such a feat was.

It was partially because Changing Star was known for her impossible deeds, so one more did not stand out too much, and partially because the clash between Nephis and the Saints of Song had been mostly obscured by the blinding radiance of her flames, as well as billowing clouds of smoke.

Mostly, though…

It was because her stunning display of overbearing power was overshadowed by someone else.

The Lord of Shadows.

Unlike Nephis of the Immortal Flame, he had not established himself as one of the most talented warriors of humanity before. Sure, his reputation was fearsome, and plenty of soldiers had witnessed his dire strength during the war. Still, he had been considered to be merely at the top of the hierarchy of power among the Saints — like Summer Knight was.

Not as someone who existed entirely outside that hierarchy.

Not only had the Lord of Shadows astounded everyone by defeating seven of the most powerful Saints of the Song Army alone, but his abominable minions had also defeated another six… which meant

that he had faced more enemy Transcendents than even Changing Star herself.

And unlike the valiant Lady of the Immortal Flame, the sellsword Saint was utterly ruthless, slaying six of them — more than any other Saint had during the battle.

And, therefore, in all of history.

More than that, the clash between the Lord of Shadows and the Saints of Song had been perfectly visible to countless observers on all sides. Countless people had seen the grotesque and frightening figure of the towering onyx demon rampaging in the onslaught of enemy attacks, evading them with chilling grace, and retaliating with ruthless cruelty in response.

Countless people had heard the echoes of his malevolent laughter, as well.

The soldiers of both armies were stunned, awed, horrified, and appalled. It was just that the soldiers of the Sword Army were mostly in awe, while the soldiers of the Song Army were mostly in the throes of horror.

Everyone, however, seemed to involuntarily lower their voices when invoking the name of the Lord of Shadows.

"Have you heard? He severed the heads of Saint Ceres. He laughed while doing it!"

"I saw it. It was… terrifying. Is she alive?"

"Was that his Transcendent form? That dreadful demon? Or… is... is the human a Transcendent form of the demon, instead?"

"How do we even know that he is human behind that creepy mask? No one has seen his face!"

"They say that he split in four at the end of the battle, each incarnation wielding a deadly blade…"

"Wait, wait! That actually explains everything. We were all convinced

that he possessed some kind of spatial Ability, right? And that was how he could seemingly be in several places at the same time. But he doesn't, there is no spatial Ability! He simply can manifest more… more of himself!"

"That would also explain why his eerie Echoes are so powerful. What if they aren't Echoes at all? What if those abominations are just his other bodies?"

"Gods… which body is the real one, then?"

"The serpent! That giant shadow serpent can shapeshift! That is how he can appear human!"

"So the real Lord of Shadows is a... a giant abomination?"

"No wonder he… it… was living in Godgrave alone…"

"Have you all lost your goddamn minds? The Lord of Shadows is a human Saint. He is just so powerful that it's just easier to believe that he is some kind of an ancient, sinister, dark being that had fed on the bone marrow of a dead god for thousands of years before being disturbed by us, foolish mortals, when we decided to invade his land… and which then emerged from the eternal darkness to take on the appearance of a man it consumed… anyway, what I am trying to say is that he is a human! D—definitely!"

"You… shut your mouth and never speak again. Okay?!"

"What?! I'm just saying!"

"I don't care what you're saying. The Lord of Shadows saved my life, and many more, during the march to Vanishing Lake. So I don't care whether he's a man or a snake. I'm just glad that he's on our side..."

Sunny would have been quite amused if he had heard these conversations. But he was busy recovering from the battle, and preoccupied by much more vital matters than eavesdropping on what the soldiers were saying to boot.

Unbeknownst to him, though, a different kind of conversation was taking place in the camp of the Song Army...

Chapter-2024: Regrettable Miscalculation

In the command tent of the Seventh Legion, the air was heavy with the smell of blood, ash, and smoke.

Five of the seven Transcendent princesses of Song were gathered there. The healers of the Song Army had already treated their wounds, but their clothes were still bearing the traces of the recent battle.

Seishan had suffered more than the other four, having been burned terribly by the incandescent white flames. But she was also the calmest, having already changed from the charred rags of her previous garment into a clean dress.

The mood in the tent was somber and dark.

Eventually, it was Beastmaster who broke the silence. Nursing her head, she asked quietly:

"How are the rest of our sisters?"

Although Ki Song had seven Transcendent daughters, there were more girls she had adopted. It was just that not all of them had become Saints.

Most had been left in the Song Domain to manage it in the absence of the most powerful members of the royal clan, but some were here in Godgrave, scattered across the seven royal legions.

Seishan answered after a short pause:

"Our sisters are fine… they are not easily killed."

Beastmaster let out a sigh of relief, then winced and asked in a subdued tone:

"What about mother, then?"

Seishan lingered for a moment.

"She will lead the farewell ritual for the fallen soldiers and see us after that. I doubt that it will be a long conversation... the army will have to start the retreat soon."

A heavy silence settled in the tent once more.

Eventually, Silent Stalker shifted slightly and threw a questioning look at her sisters.

Seishan smiled darkly.

"Yes. We have… miscalculated, indeed."

Beastmaster shook her head.

"There was no miscalculation. We just didn't have the correct information."

With that, she glanced at Death Singer bitterly.

The lovely oracle stared back with an aggrieved expression.

"What? I warned you! I told you that we're all going to die!"

The tantalizing enchantress remained silent for a few moments, then let out a soft chuckle.

"...That you did. In any case, the things we learned from my thralls in the Sword Army, and from Revel, were not entirely true. The Lord of Shadows is far more than we expected."

Seishan let out a sigh and nodded.

"It seems that he is like the other two — a bearer of a Divine Aspect."

Lonesome Howl cursed.

"Damn it all... the plan was for our vassals to destroy his Echoes, then help us deal with that man — before all of us moved on to assist you against Changing Star. Instead, they are dead, and we've been brutalized by not one, but two of these monsters. Gods… how is Morgan even still alive? I feel like I've been run over by a PTV."

Of course, a PTV would have been utterly destroyed if it collided with Lonesome Howl. Additionally…

Her voice sounded gruff and boisterous, but her sisters could sense an unfamiliar note of turmoil and upheaval in its pleasant sound.

Seishan sighed.

"It is unfortunate that we made a mistake in evaluating the power of the Lord of Shadows. He is no less of a threat than Changing Star is… more of a threat, perhaps. The morale of our soldiers was already low because of his raids on the supply caravans. Now, they'll be jumping at every shadow."

Beastmaster let out a joyless chuckle.

"...Can you blame them?"

She shook her head, then added somberly:

"That Ability of his took me by surprise. It is some form of duplication… his Dormant Ability, perhaps? Quantitative Abilities are often tied to one's Rank, after all. Howl and others witnessed four copies — that would coincide with the Transcendent Rank. But then one of his other Abilities would not make sense. Is he using a powerful Memory or a Legacy Relic in place, perhaps?"

The others seemed unsure.

Beastmaster lingered for a while, then shook her head.

"It's useless to guess, isn't it? If his truly is a Divine Aspect, then we shouldn't try to apply common logic to him. Besides, that is not even the most important question. The most important question is… why did he leave us alive?"

Lonesome Howl looked down, her expression growing dark.

"...He seemed to be reluctant to anger mother."

Hearing that, Seishan scoffed.

"Does that man look like someone who would be scared of incurring a Sovereign's wrath? If he was, he wouldn't have joined the war at all. There are plenty of Death Zones in the Dream Realm where he could have fled to, and we already know that he is more than capable of making one his home. More than that, he also spared Ceres, Siord, and the Saint of Sorrow."

She shook her head.

"No… he spared you because Nephis ordered him to hold back. Just like she had done with the soldiers guarding the supply caravans."

The rest of Ki Song's daughters looked at her with a hint of surprise.

Eventually, Beastmaster asked:

"...Why did she order him to hold back, then? And why did she hold back herself?"

Seishan's expression turned pensive.

She remained silent for a while, then sighed.

"I do not know. Her mercy and benevolence are just an act, though — of that, I am sure. There is hardly a less merciful and benevolent person in both worlds than Nephis of the Immortal Flame clan."

Seishan hesitated for a moment.

"Not that I hold it against her, of course. In fact, she's quite admirable. Nephis... is scheming something, but what? I can't figure it out."

Her exquisitely beautiful face seemed troubled.

Lonesome Howl sneered.

"Aren't you giving her too much credit, sister? She is already as high as any of us can be, and there is nothing left for her to earn. What can she ever scheme for? Before, I could have imagined a twisted scenario where she wanted to prove herself and become… I don't know, daddy's favorite. But with Morgan falling out of favor, even that is already beside the point."

She leaned back and crossed her arms.

"Your judgment is always clouded when it comes to those years, Shan. Sure, that girl achieved something outstanding on the Forgotten Shore — assembling an army of loyal followers, killing an invincible tyrant, and taking his throne… then getting most of her army obliterated to win an unwinnable battle. But that was in the past."

As she was speaking, Seishan's expression changed subtly.

Lonesome Howl did not notice, but Beastmaster did.

She smiled.

"Wait… you don't think?"

Seishan lingered for a few moments, then slowly shook her head.

"No… of course not. Yes, Nephis and the Lord of Shadows are immensely powerful, but even they stand no chance against a Supreme. They would know it better than us, too. Unless she conquers the Fourth Nightmare, it would be pointless to even think about disloyalty — and Anvil won't allow her to challenge a Seed."

So, thinking in that direction was a fool's errand.

And yet…

Seishan remembered Gunlaug's golden armor.

And how impenetrable it had seemed.

Her brow furrowed a little, and she gave Beastmaster a complicated look.

The beautiful enchantress smiled.

"What? Are you regretting dissuading me from killing her in Antarctica now?"

Seishan did not answer immediately.

Eventually, she said:

"I'd probably be a Skinwalker vessel now if you did."

Beastmaster sighed.

"True. Then I'll express my gratitude to her the next time we meet..."

Chapter-2025: A Bitter Triumph

On the other side of the scorched and ravaged battlefield, in the camp of the Sword Army, there was another tent. The three people inside were supposed to be in a much better mood than the Queen's daughters — they were the victors, after all — and yet, the atmosphere was just as somber.

Sunny was sitting on a wooden trunk, for once feeling burdened and suffocated by the weight of his armor and the cool touch of his mask. He wished he could dismiss it and feel the gentle touch of fresh air on his skin…

Or Neph's gentle touch.

Nephis herself was sitting quietly on her austere cot, wearing a pristine white tunic. She did not seem like someone who had just participated in a harrowing battle, but her gaze was cold and distant, devoid of human warmth.

Still, she made an effort to spare him a pale smile.

Cassie was sitting on the Shadow Chair, which Sunny had summoned for her. Out of the three of them, she had fared the worst in the battle — the Song Army had not sent more than one Saint to face her, but Cassie was not someone meant for the mayhem of the battlefield, either. She had won the duel, of course, but not without suffering several painful blows.

Or maybe she had simply endured them on purpose, not wishing to disclose the true extent of her lethality to those who considered her a relatively weak and helpless Saint. Even now, Sunny couldn't say for sure.

All three of them were silent.

The silence that surrounded them had a special quality, too, because of the runic enchantment Cassie had drawn on the floor — a complicated spell to ward off unwanted attention.

Sunny sighed, then turned into a shadow. A moment later, he manifested himself into a person again, this time wearing [Definitely Not Me] instead of Weaver's Mask.

After lingering for a moment, he said:

"Things went well, did they not?"

They had. A few unforeseen complications had emerged, just as expected, but the plan had worked better than they could have hoped. Nephis had greatly elevated her status, cementing herself as the only voice of reason and compassion in the dreadful crucible of this cruel, demented war. She had won the hearts of countless soldiers of the Sword Army… and of the Song Army, as well.

Better yet, she had saved countless lives that would have been lost in the senseless slaughter otherwise.

She had also established herself as a leader among the Saints, let them witness the will of the Sovereigns being defied with impunity, and shown the vast and awesome power of her pure flames…

That last part was especially important.

Personal valor still mattered most among the Legacy Clans, after all, whose claim to nobility rested on the laurels of martial excellence — with Saints serving as living embodiments of the fearless virtue the members of military aristocracy were meant to possess.

Nephis had not only demonstrated her willingness and ability to disobey the Sovereigns, but also proved that she had the right to.

…Not only because she was strong herself, but also because she was capable enough to ensure the loyalty of someone who was in no way weaker.

The Lord of Shadows.

Sunny's astounding performance was like a cherry on top of a delicious cake… or rather, a scoop of ice cream on top of a delectable waffle, in his case. With fresh strawberries on the side.

This aspect of their plan was just as important as the battle itself. After all, at the end of the day, it did not matter what the soldiers, the Legacies, and the Saints thought or felt. Nothing mattered, because in the world where strength reigned supreme, the reign of Supremes was absolute.

Since they were the strongest.

Their strength was so tyrannical, in fact, that even the most exalted warriors of humanity could not dare to dream of resisting their rule — otherwise, half of the warriors in both great armies would have stayed home instead of following the Sovereigns to Godgrave.

There were plenty of dissidents among the soldiers, and among the Saints, too — like Tyris and Roan of the White Feather clan. The longer the war continued and the more lives it claimed, the more the disillusionment within the great armies spread… like pressure building in a tank.

However, the Sovereigns were too strong, and could not be defied. There was no vent to release the pressure, and so, the pressure only grew.

Or rather, there had not been. Until today.

What Nephis, Sunny, and Cassie had done was more than simply change the nature of one battle. They had also shown people a... a glimpse of hope. A vision of the future where someone was, in fact, strong enough to challenge the Supremes. A possibility.

Granted…

It was all, of course, nothing but a lie — a treacherous bluff concocted to deceive the people. Because they still had no real way of defeating the Sovereigns, only a determination to find one.

Still, as far as grand acts of treachery and deceit went, this one had been performed quite wonderfully.

The plan had worked very well.

And that was exactly the problem.

Nephis looked at Sunny silently, but it was Cassie who spoke.

"It did go well. Too well, really."

So, it seemed that they had come to the same conclusion as him.

Sunny had anticipated that the Sword Army would win the battle — they were themselves warriors of the Sword Army, after all. However, the defeat of the enemy was too decisive, too crushing.

The losses of the Song Army were too dire when compared to the losses of the Sword Domain. That, he had not expected.

Everything seemed to have happened exactly how the King of Swords had wanted it to happen…

Which meant that the King had known what Nephis would do far in advance.

Did he also know why she had done it?

What was her true intention?

What was her goal?

Sunny could not help but feel ill at ease.

He looked at Nephis, lingered for a moment, and then asked:

"How much does he really trust you? How much does he distrust you? What has his demeanor been like in these past few years, when he interacted with you?"

It had been… more than five years — six for Sunny because of the Tomb of Ariel — since Clan Valor adopted Nephis. Her status within the royal clan was honestly quite strange. On one hand, she had been kept at a distance and mistreated by the elders of Valor, who almost seemed keen on getting her killed.

On the other hand, Anvil himself had shown her quite a bit of grace, even making her the nominal commander of the Sword Army after sending Morgan away.

Their relationship was ambiguous, and since the man almost never showed human emotions, Sunny could not even guess what was happening in his head.

Under the iron crown.

Nephis remained silent for a few moments, staring at him evenly.

Then, she suddenly said:

"...It's unpleasant to talk to you when you are wearing a mask."

Sunny blinked.

What was that, all of a sudden?

Was she trying to say that she wanted to see his face?

Nephis seemed a little surprised by her response, as well. She frowned slightly, then shook her head.

"It is hard to tell. He keeps most people at a distance. His heart is a mystery… if he even has one. Still, with me, he was a bit different. Almost… sentimental? No, hardly. Maybe curious. I thought that the attention he was paying me was minimal, but Morgan seemed surprised. As if it was much more than what he paid to everyone else."

She hesitated for a bit, then added evenly:

"It is because of my mother, I think. He spoke of her a couple of times."

So… general weirdness, but nothing that alluded to distrust or suspicion. Quite the contrary, actually.

Of course, one had to remember that the Sovereigns had insistently tried to assassinate Nephis in the past, when she had no value.

Sunny sighed, unsure what to think.

He still felt uncomfortable speaking openly about their secrets, even with Cassie's enchantments protecting them from being spied on. So, he tried to remain as vague as possible.

In the end, he simply said:

"I think it is better if we assume the worst."

Chapter-2026: Escalation

"I think it is better if we assume the worst."

The worst being that Anvil had known all along about the irreconcilable hatred Nephis had harbored towards him and Ki Song, and was fully expecting her to try taking revenge on them at some point.

Perhaps he simply did not care, not even considering her a threat. Perhaps he did not mind making use of Nephis and her talents before eventually disposing of her.

In any case, today's events were bound to change things.

Cassie frowned.

"...Our timetable needs to be accelerated, then."

She was right.

They had to hurry, anyway.

Now that the Song Army had lost a decisive battle, it would be pushed back off the Breastbone Reach. The power of Ki Song's Domain would diminish, and Anvil would gain an advantage — which was a problem.

In truth, today's battle had brought another benefit to Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie… albeit quite a morbid one.

Even though they had hoped that far fewer Saints would perish, in the end, the actual number was quite high. Which meant that both Domains had grown weaker today — many Citadels stood without masters now, and there was no one left alive to claim them. So, in the final confrontation, both Anvil and Ki Song would not be as powerful

as they had been the day before.

However, this loss had affected the Queen of Worms disproportionately. It was to the point where the King of Swords could very well decide to challenge her before the remaining Citadels in Godgrave were conquered, if given reason to believe that Revel's expedition would succeed.

So, the situation was both highly unstable and fraught with peril. They could not be cautious or patient anymore.

Worst of all… Sunny and Nephis were not anywhere close to figuring out how to attain Supremacy, still. There had been some progress, but nothing they could bet their lives on.

And with the pace of war suddenly changing, he was not sure that they would be able to solve the puzzle in time.

Fighting the Sovereigns as Saints it was, then?

Remembering the sight of the sea of swords falling from the sky, Sunny gritted his teeth.

Why did it matter, though?

There had been two opinions on how to kill the Sovereigns from the very start.

Nephis believed that the only way to defeat them was to become Supreme themselves.

While Sunny… Sunny believed more in the tried and tested method of waiting for the enemies to weaken each other, and then stabbing them in the back.

Now, their chances of attaining Supremacy in time seemed slim.

But on top of that, their element of surprise seemed to be gone, which meant that it would not be easy to strike the enemy in the back.

Things did not look good.

He sighed.

"I take it back. Things are way worse than what we assumed was the worst."

He needed to forge Neph's sword.

He needed to make the final preparations for the battle against the Sovereigns… luckily, Nightmare had been working hard all this time.

He also needed to learn what had happened to Rain during the battle.

And...

Cassie shifted slightly and faced him.

Her voice sounded grim:

"We'll have to have a conversation with Saint Jest soon."

Sunny remained silent for a moment, then nodded.

After that, Cassie seemed to struggle with something for a while.

Eventually, she turned to Nephis and said in a hesitant tone:

"There is a… countermeasure we can use to slow things down."

Nephis simply raised an eyebrow.

Cassie lingered for a bit before adding quietly:

"It's about our friends in a faraway place."

Hearing that, Sunny couldn't help but frown.

She was talking about Effie, Kai, and Jet, of course.

At the beginning of the war, the Song Domain had gained a tremendous advantage by unleashing Mordret upon the world. Therefore, to make sure that the Sovereigns thoroughly exhausted each other's power, a correction had to be made.

So, Jet had been tasked with subtly influencing the government when Morgan inevitably came knocking on the door. Then, she joined the Princess of War with Effie and Kai to hold the Prince of Nothing back... thus preventing him from conquering the Sword Domain while the King was waging war in the north.

They had been desperately defending Bastion all this time.

But now…

The situation was different.

Anvil had turned the tables on the Queen of Worms, and it was the Song Domain that seemed to be at a dire disadvantage.

So, if Bastion fell in Mordret's hands, the equilibrium could be restored.

It was just that they all knew what kind of monster Mordret was.

Sunny did not like the idea of surrendering Bastion to him one bit. In fact, he was vehemently against it.

Too many people he liked and valued were living there, on the shore of the beautiful lake.

However, in the end, it was up to Nephis.

So, he stared at her silently, wondering what decision she would make.

…And what he would do about that decision.

Nephis remained silent for a while, no human emotion visible in her cold, grey eyes.

He suddenly felt chilly despite the suffocating heat enveloping Godgrave.

Finally, Nephis glanced at him, frowning briefly at the sight of his mask, and shook her head.

"No. We won't be troubling our friends."

Sunny was both surprised and a bit relieved.

He had expected a ruthless and pragmatic answer, but Nephis seemed reluctant to surrender Bastion to Mordret, too.

He couldn't help but ask:

"Why?"

She looked at him impassively for a while, then smiled faintly.

"Because it would leave a bad taste in my mouth. I... dislike compromises."

With that, Nephis rose and inhaled deeply.

"Come. He will want to see us soon."

She had disobeyed the King's order.

And now, it was time to receive the punishment for her defiance.

Sunny hoped that it wouldn't be too harsh…

But, at the same time, he hoped that it would.

Because their web of deceit was not finished yet. One final performance remained.

The harsher Nephis was punished, the more indignant the people whom she had saved would feel.

And the more indignant they felt, the more her grasp on their hearts would tighten…

Chapter-2027: Godheart

Godheart…

That was the word Rain heard being spoken around the camp of the battered Seventh Legion. The calamitous battle between the two great armies had taken place in the central part of the Breastbone Reach, right above where the dead god's heart would have been.

Hence, people were calling it the Battle of Godheart.

As fitting of a name as any, really. There had been nothing divine about that damn battle, but many hearts had been scarred and broken in its maw.

The camp of the Seventh Legion was noticeably emptier than it had been before.

Their own little corner of it was, too… luckily, not because the cohort had sustained losses. It was simply because Fleur had been called upon to help treat the wounded, and Ray was keeping her company.

So, Rain and Tamar were left alone.

Rain prepared dinner while Tamar went about her centurion duties. With that done, they ate in silence and then fell asleep on the spot, too exhausted — both mentally and physically — to even hide from the oppressive radiance of the overcast sky in their tents.

They did not have a lot of time to rest.

As soon as the worn-out soldiers were able to march, the Song Army was going to abandon the temporary camp and retreat north, toward the Collarbone Plain. The Sword Army would most likely pursue… so, the march was promising to be tough and unforgiving.

A few hours later, Rain and Tamar were woken up by Fleur and Ray, who had returned from the field hospital. The delicate healer looked like someone on the verge of suffering essence exhaustion, and her stealthy boyfriend was not much better.

Rain yawned, rubbed her eyes, then pushed the half-full pot of army stew toward them.

"Here… eat."

Ray gave her a nod of gratitude and sat down. Fleur, meanwhile, glanced at Tamar.

"Your father is looking for you. He's in the field hospital."

Noticing Tamar's sharp gaze, she put a hand on her shoulder and added in a soothing tone:

"His wounds were serious, but he is doing well now. Don't worry."

Tamar lingered for a moment, then nodded and rose to her feet.

Rain did not have anything better to do, so she decided to follow the young Legacy.

The two of them walked through the camp of the Seventh Legion, eventually crossing into the avenue separating it from other divisions of the Song Army. As they walked, they could hear the soldiers talking about the battle in numb, subdued voices.

Some were sharing their fears and concerns about the retreat and the future prospects of the Song Army. Most, however, were talking about Changing Star…

And the Lord of Shadows.

Rain threw a brief glance at her shadow, feeling a little strange.

She had witnessed the clash between her brother and the seven Saints of Song. The fury of it, the chilling scale, the destruction…

Despite his reassurance, she had been worried sick while watching,

clenching her fists and forgetting to breathe. It had been such a strange situation to find herself in — the Lord of Shadows was one of the enemy champions, after all, and yet, she could not help but root for him instead of her own side.

At the end, his towering figure crumbled into darkness, and the battle continued on a much smaller, human scale. So, Rain had not seen how it ended, but she learned the result soon.

Her brother had defeated the seven Saints, including three of the Queen's daughters. Crushed them, really.

He had also killed six Saints — one with his own hands, five more with the help of his servants.

No wonder people could not stop talking about him, shivering in fear as they shared the details of the bloody clash.

Rain herself felt obligated to feel frightened.

…Of course, she couldn't. The image of her whimsical, grumpy, and quietly caring brother was the opposite of terrifying. How could she be afraid of someone who made her delicious, puffy pancakes to celebrate a successful hunt?

She wondered what the soldiers of the Song Army would think if they learned that the great and terrible Lord of Shadows was in the habit of making her nutritious breakfasts.

'I'd better keep it to myself…'

The field hospital was not far, but it still took some time for Rain and Tamar to reach it.

Neither of them was in the mood to talk, and they had not spoken a word about the battle to each other.

As they walked, however, Tamar glanced at Rain and hesitated for a few moments.

"Are you okay?"

Rain raised an eyebrow.

Of course, she wasn't okay.

None of them were.

...Nevertheless, she forced out a grin.

"Sure. Why?"

Tamar frowned a little.

"You just seem… unlike yourself, somehow."

Rain remained silent for a while, then shrugged with a helpless smile.

"You noticed, huh? Yeah… I don't know. I guess I just feel a bit weird today."

She couldn't quite explain it, but there was indeed something different about her ever since the conclusion of the battle. It was subtle and almost imperceptible, neither physical nor spiritual… but it was definitely there, at the heart of her being.

They reached the field hospital. It was an enormous canvas pavilion permeated with the stench of blood and sweat — the scene inside was like a painting of hell, but luckily, it wasn't as bad as it could have been.

Many of the wounded in the center of the battlefield had been miraculously healed by the white flames of Lady Nephis. Of those that remained, the heavier cases had been treated by the Awakened healers already… it was just that there weren't that many potent healers in the world, and those that belonged to the Song Army did not have endless essence.

So, the soldiers who had received relatively minor wounds could only wait while being treated by mundane medics.

Rain grimaced and tried not to cover her nose.

The officers were being treated in a separate space inside the

pavilion. She stayed back, letting Tamar go inside alone, and waited patiently near the entrance.

However, she could still hear some of the conversation between her friend and her father, the Saint of Sorrow.

"...I heard that you met Telle of the White Feather clan."

Oh, so that was the name of the beautiful Feather Knight. No wonder she was so troublesome.

"Yes… I lost."

Tamar's restrained voice betrayed a hint of dejection. The Saint of Sorrow seemed to chuckle before saying calmly:

"That is alright. I lost, too."

There was a long stretch of silence, and then he added with a sigh.

"It is strange, isn't it? The Lord of Shadows had saved my daughter's life, but today, I went into battle intending to kill him. Changing Star is meant to be one of the greatest threats to the Song Domain, but today, she healed and saved our soldiers…"

Rain did not hear the rest, because at that moment, a quiet whisper resounded in her mind.

[Hey… I need to talk to you.]

She hesitated for a moment.

[Talk, then? I'm listening.]

However, her shadow shifted slightly in the trembling light of a luminous Memory, as if shaking its head.

[No, not here. Go find somewhere private.]

Rain sighed.

Was she going to be swallowed by that weird cottage again?

But she did not really mind.

Perhaps her brother would be able to explain the subtle change that had happened to her on the battlefield…

Chapter-2028: Clandestine Meeting

It was not easy to find privacy in the temporary camp of the Song Army. There was no night in Godgrave, and unlike in the city-like main camp, there were no permanent structures and deserted alleys here.

Still, there was also less security and fewer watchmen. The order had hardly been restored in the aftermath of the battle, and most soldiers were either asleep or resting.

The funeral rite for the fallen was going to begin soon, too, which gave Rain a chance to slip away unnoticed.

She found a desolate space hidden between a row of empty tents and the outer palisade, hiding in its cool shadow. A moment later, she felt herself being pulled into the darkness, and experienced the familiar sensation of being transported somewhere else.

Only, this time, there was no quaint brick cottage waiting for her on the other end of the journey.

Instead, she found herself in the Hollows, with her brother standing by her side.

The ancient jungle sprawled around them, brimming with a myriad of scents, rustles, and harrowing perils. Rain could not help but shudder, remembering the doomed march to the Collarbone Citadel. The gruesome scenes of people being devoured by the jungle surfaced in her mind, making her feel nauseated.

There were no trees or vines close to her, at least. They were standing in the middle of a large clearing, with only the scarlet moss covering the surface of the ancient bone. It was a relief, but…

They weren't alone in the clearing.

Not too far away from, the corpse of an appalling abomination lay on the ground, seeping blood into the scarlet moss. Next to it were two figures.

One was a man in a fearsome onyx armor, his face hidden behind an eerie mask of black polished wood… the Lord of Shadows.

Rain blinked a couple of times, stared at him for a few moments, then glanced at her brother.

No, but how… were they really the same person?

If she did not know the truth, she would have never believed it.

Her brother was a young man of modest stature, with a slender build and delicate features. He was not quite flimsy, but no one would call him physically imposing either. He wore simple clothes and wielded no weapons.

The Lord of Shadows, meanwhile… actually, strangely enough, it was difficult to tell what his height was. Nevertheless, he seemed to tower above everything, as if his mere presence made the world smaller. His battered onyx armor made it impossible to see him as anything except a deadly warrior, and his menacing mask was chilling to look at, pools of impenetrable darkness nestling in its eyes.

More than that, their very presence was different.

Her brother emanated an easygoing, relaxed, and joyful feeling. He was quick to smile, and his dark eyes often glistened with wry humor.

The Lord of Shadows, though, was the epitome of aloof and threatening. His gaze, his bearing, the subtle slant of his shoulders… all of it expressed cold indifference, ruthlessness, and arrogance.

This was indeed a person who could slaughter Saints and laugh as he did so.

Rain was taken aback for a moment.

'Well… it makes sense.'

Her brother was living several lives at the same time while hiding that fact. Naturally, he would need to develop sublime acting skills to pull off this scheme — otherwise, there would be no point in hiding his true identity.

She couldn't help but wonder which of his incarnations was the real one, though. The warm and joyful one she knew, or the cold and unfamiliar slayer standing in front of her?

For all Rain knew, the guy running a restaurant in Bastion could be the true face of her brother!

As great as her shock at seeing two versions of him was, there was someone else who immediately stole all her attention.

Because the Lord of Shadows was not alone.

Next to him… stood a breathtakingly beautiful woman.

Her beauty was so lovely and exquisite that Rain felt utterly stunned for a moment, barely able to think. The woman wore a white tunic and a seawave cloak, her hair falling down like a cascade of pale gold…

Her eyes were hidden behind a blindfold, but Rain remembered how they looked very well.

After all, she had met this beautiful Saint before.

It was Lady Cassia, Song of the Fallen.

'What… what… what is Lady Cassia doing here?'

Logically, it made sense. The Lord of Shadows and Song of the Fallen were both members of the Sword Army, after all — so, it was only reasonable to assume that they knew each other.

Still, Rain was utterly shocked to meet her here.

She suddenly felt self-conscious and uncomfortable… ashamed, even.

It was because Lady Nephis and the members of her cohort had shown Rain great kindness before, but now, she was fighting on the side of their enemies. There was no reason for her to feel shame — her decision to join the Song Army had been dictated by the desire to protect her friends and neighbors against the invading forces of the Sword Domain, after all, and that decision was still valid.

But emotions were not always reasonable, and so, Rain couldn't help but feel as if she had betrayed the benevolence of the beautiful woman in front of her.

'...Why did he bring her here?'

Shifting from one foot to another, Rain looked at her brother hesitantly.

He smiled.

"Don't worry. She is my… partner in crime, I guess."

Hearing that, Lady Cassie tilted her head a little.

Rain's brother chuckled.

"Rain, Cassie… you two should already know each other, right?"

Rain remained silent for a moment, then nodded.

Then, she flinched and hurriedly voiced her answer aloud:

"Oh… yes. It is nice to see you again after all this time, Saint Cassia."

The beautiful Saint smiled softly…

Rain was more or less convinced that entire kingdoms could be toppled by that smile.

"It is nice to meet you again as well, Rain."

Her eyes shook a little.

'...She actually remembers me?'

Her brother, meanwhile, looked at the Lord of Shadows and scoffed.

"Anyway. I asked Cassie to help me figure out a few things about your Awakening. The two armies are relatively close to each other at the moment, so that fool over there carried her here to take a look at you."

The Lord of Shadows answered in a cold, menacing tone:

"Who are you calling a fool, you fool?"

Rain stared at the two of them with a strange expression.

No, but were they really… really the same person?

Chapter-2029: Fortune Telling

Sunny allowed the Lord of Shadows to turn back into a shadow after exchanging a round of insults with himself.

Released from his control, the haughty, naughty, creepy, and crazy guys glided across the floor and wrapped themselves around him, seemingly satisfied to be reunited with their happy sibling after being apart for so long.

Far away in the main camp of the Sword Army, the gloomy shadow turned its head and threw a resentful glance at Master Sunless.

Why was everyone getting together while he alone was stuck keeping company to this…

Sunny ignored the ingrate.

In any case, there was a reason for why he did not want to keep the Lord of Shadows manifested — his reserves of essence were depleted after the recent battle, so there was no point in wasting more of it than necessary on maintaining an additional avatar. Carrying Cassie with Shadow Step had already taken a relatively considerable toll.

But it was necessary.

In truth, she did not have to meet Rain in person to use her Dormant Ability and tell Sunny what she saw — after all, the blind seer had been helping him and the other members of the cohort from a distance throughout the war.

But Rain was a bit special, being that she was a human Awakened who did not carry the Nightmare Spell. It was also easier for Cassie to learn about a being when she was close to them…

Considering how important it was to understand Rain's situation,

Sunny decided to pull out all the stops.

He glanced at the corpse of the Nightmare Creature laying in the middle of the clearing. The abomination had been stalking this area of the Hollows, so he eliminated it in advance to make sure that nothing could disturb them.

Cassie had already drawn the runes around the clearing, as well, using the soul shards harvested from the abomination as the power source. This place was halfway between the Song camp and the Sword camp, equally distant from both Sovereigns.

Hopefully, no one would learn what he was going to hear.

Rain, meanwhile, seemed to have noticed the enchanted lines of the runic circle and studied it with interest.

"What is that?"

Cassie answered after a moment of hesitation:

"It's a runic enchantment to ward off various kinds of unwanted attention."

Rain glanced at her with a subtle hint of amusement.

"...There are different kinds of unwanted attention?"

The blind seer nodded.

"Of course. There are natural senses, Memories with monitoring functions, sorcery, special Aspect Abilities, divination powers…"

As the list went on, Rain blinked.

"Wait, what do you mean by runic enchantment? How does that work?"

Cassie pointed to the subtly shimmering essence lines.

"Runic sorcery is the most widely known and easily accessible school of sorcery, similar to Shaping, but…"

Sunny interrupted her with a dry cough.

"We don't really have time for a lecture on the basics of sorcery, sorry. Let's get to business."

Rain looked a little disappointed for a moment, then looked at him with a hint of hesitation.

"Alright. So… what do I do?"

He smiled.

"You don't need to do anything. Just stand there and let Cassie take a good look at you."

His sister's expression froze.

"S—sunny! Phrasing!"

Cassie, meanwhile, chuckled.

"Don't worry, Rain. I'm used to it."

With that, she approached the young woman and faced her. If not for her blue blindfold, it would have looked as if she was looking Rain in the eyes.

Sunny suddenly felt nervous.

Cassie's Dormant Ability allowed her to read the runes of a living being. Now that she was a Saint, she could gain quite a deep insight into who they were, what Memories they wielded, what powers they possessed… in fact, she could more or less learn everything about the person except for their Flaw.

Of course, her true power was to gain insight, not to read runes. The runes that all Awakened saw — except for Rain — were just a handy instrument created by the Spell, and therefore, the runes that Cassie could read when using her Dormant Ability were merely the Spell translating the knowledge she had gained into a more familiar language.

A convenient modification of Cassie's own power, just like creating Shadows with fragments and nurturing them by sacrificing Memories had been for Sunny.

Therefore, he was not sure what Cassie would see when looking at Rain.

Would the Spell still translate the mystical insight into easily accessible runes, like it did for the Awakened and the Nightmare Creatures the blind seer examined? Or would she have to fathom the depths of Rain's soul herself?

And what would she see?

By all accounts, Rain was only supposed to possess a single Attribute… maybe two. Sunny himself had only possessed one innate Attribute — [Fated] — before undergoing the First Nightmare, after all.

His other two Attributes, [Child of Shadows] and [Mark of Divinity], had come from the nameless temple slave whose body he had taken in the Nightmare. Similarly, he had also received the [Temple Slave] Aspect from him, which then evolved into his true Aspect… Shadow Slave.

But Rain had never undergone the First Nightmare.

She had learned to sense and control her essence first, and then Awakened by forming a soul core herself. So, unless she had done something to develop them, there was nowhere for additional Attributes to come from. Only her innate Attribute was supposed to be there… whatever it was.

She would not possess an Aspect, either. Unlike the carriers of the Nightmare Spell, the original Awakened had to find and unseal their Aspect themselves — many never did. Neither did they find their Flaws.

Those were only required if one wished to attain Transcendence and make the first step into the realm of divinity.

Therefore, all that Cassie was supposed to see was an innate Attribute

— if Rain had one — and her Memories… perhaps the [Mark of Shadows], as well.

But something had happened to Rain on that battlefield.

Sunny was not sure how she changed, but he could feel it. Something had shifted inside Rain once she chose to spare Telle of White Feather, and that change was persisting still.

So…

Had she unsealed her Aspect?

After a while, he glanced at Cassie.

The blind seer took a deep breath, then frowned, and subtly shook her head.

Chapter-2030: Runs in the Family

So, not an Aspect.

Sunny was not really disappointed — in fact, he had not expected Rain to unseal her Aspect so soon — but he was a little concerned.

If not that, then what?

One disturbing possibility came to mind… that Rain had been infected with a seed of Corruption in the middle of that damned battle. After all, from what he could tell, most of the people who became carriers of the Spell had some reason for why their souls were fertile soil for the Nightmare to take root.

And what better reason could there be than the appalling terror of the Godheart Battle?

Still, he had already studied Rain's soul, searching for any sign of encroaching Corruption. It was pure and pristine, just as it had been before… in fact, if anything, it seemed more whole than it had ever been before.

Sunny looked at Cassie somberly.

She took a step back, faced Rain, and smiled faintly.

"First, allow me to congratulate you, Rain... it seems that you have a True Name."

Sunny froze for a moment.

Was that it? She received a True Name?

Did that mean...

However, at that moment, Cassie shook her head subtly again, as if having read his thoughts.

"In fact, you have had it for some time, already. If I were to wager a guess, I'd say that you earned it during your Awakening… a name is a tool of distinction, after all, and there is hardly a more distinguished feat than becoming an Awakened by yourself in an age when everyone else carries the Nightmare Spell."

Rain blinked a couple of times, then threw a sideways glance at Sunny.

"...You told her?"

He coughed.

Right. Cassie was not entirely a stranger, but she was also not someone Rain knew well. It would feel strange to learn that many of her secrets had been shared with a distant acquaintance.

However, it was really not his fault.

"It's not that I told her… it's just that Cassie has a way of knowing things. It's better to just make peace with it."

Rain stared at him for a few moments, then turned back to the blind seer. Her chin rose a little, and she asked while trying to suppress her excitement:

"Oh… okay. Well, anyway — so, what is it? My True Name?"

Cassie remained silent for a few moments, which caused Rain's expression to grow worried.

"Wait! It's not… something stupid like Not So Funny Anymore, is it?"

The blind seer chuckled, then shook her head.

"I am sure that it's not. It's just that… much of your being is a puzzle to me. Usually, I see things much clearer — but today, I need to interpret the insights myself. Therefore, although I gained an understanding of your True Name, it is going to take me some time to

decipher it."

She hesitated, and then glanced at Sunny.

"I'll need your help, as well. And Nephis too."

He scratched the back of his head.

That… actually made sense. If the Spell was not translating the insight Cassie gained into a convenient collection of runes, then interpreting a True Name was no easy task. In fact, it was an entirely new kind of challenge.

However, he was sure that they could solve it in a few days. Cassie possessed the knowledge, Sunny was a master of dead languages, and Nephis was a talented Shaper — she had more experience dealing with True Names of things than both of them combined.

Rain sighed in disappointment.

"Oh…"

Sunny wanted to sigh, too.

If Rain had gained her True Name during or as a result of her Awakening, then he still had no idea what happened to her during the battle.

Feeling his tension, Cassie turned her head slightly and smiled.

"I also saw your Memories. It's quite an impressive collection, for a young Awakened. It's just that…"

She was talking to Rain, but facing Sunny.

"...The Green Canteen? Safety First? Really?"

Then, she pursed her lips.

"And what is up with those descriptions?!"

Sunny scowled, feeling as if he had been unjustly slighted.

"What? Those are great names! Short and to the point!"

Cassie let out a heavy sigh and shook her head again.

After remaining silent for a few moments, she spoke again:

"You also seem to possess three Attributes, Rain."

Three… that was more than Sunny had expected.

The blind seer continued:

"One is related to affinity to shadows, and is… somewhat external, I think. It should be the result of the Mark of Shadows. The second one, though, is quite a surprise."

Sunny raised his eyebrow, listening intently.

Cassie hesitated a little, as if choosing the right words.

"It has to do with… names, I think. And power. In short, I suspect that you possess a rare talent — an affinity to Shaping, the most ancient kind of sorcery."

Rain seemed stunned.

Sunny was quite surprised, too.

'So Rain's primary talent… doesn't even have anything to do with combat? She is meant to be a sorceress?'

Why had he been forcing her to hunt Nightmare Creatures all that time, then?!

No, no... a sorceress or not, she still needed to know how to defend herself. So, he had nothing to feel sorry about.

He remained motionless for a moment.

'Damn, does sorcery run in our family or something?'

One fact could not be denied anymore, though…

Sadly, it seemed that their mother's poetic talent had been passed on to Rain in its entirety, leaving nothing for Sunny.

That could explain his own lack of naming sense, at least!

Rain finally came to her senses, lowering her head to stare at the runic circle Cassie had created.

"Sorcery? Well… wow. That sounds fancy."

With that, she turned to Sunny and grinned.

"You said you were a sorcerer too. Can you teach me?"

Sunny smiled awkwardly and shook his head.

"Shaping is very different from the kind of sorcery I practice. They share some basics, but not enough to qualify me as a teacher. In truth… actually, I tried to learn the Sorcery of Names on many occasions. But it was all useless. I just don't have the talent for it — and unlike runic sorcery, one has to be born a Shaper."

He paused for a moment, then added:

"Don't worry, though. I already have a teacher in mind…"

Nephis knew more about Shaping than anyone he had ever met, with the exception of Ananke. So, there was no better person to teach Rain than her.

It would be quite a hassle to arrange the lessons, sadly…

But if Rain did learn at least the very basics of Shaping, it would be a great boon to her. It would also mask her lack of an Aspect perfectly.

Finally, he looked at Cassie.

"What about the third Attribute?"

She lingered for a while, then frowned slightly.

"That one, I'll have to ponder on it a bit longer. All I can say now is that it has to do with Rain's soul, as well as its connection to the

world. Both are… quite special."

Sunny scowled.

His sister wasn't…

Cassie interrupted his thoughts once again:

"Don't worry. It is entirely different from the Attribute you used to possess."

He let out a sigh of relief.

The last thing Sunny wanted was to learn that Rain was Fated, just like he had been.

That damn Attribute had brought him so much pain and sorrow that he would not wish it on his worst enemy.

In fact, he would not wish it on any enemy. A Fated enemy would be a real nightmare to deal with!

Rain seemed both excited and curious. Eventually, though, she simply smiled.

"So… I have a True Name, a talent for sorcery, and am quite a special person on top of that. Oh, and I am also a real Legacy — a princess of the Shadow Clan, no less. Ha! Am I not a lucky girl?"

With that, she looked at the frayed and bloodied fabric of the Puppeteer's Shroud and grimaced.

"What the hell, why am I in such a sorry state then?"

Glancing at Sunny, she pursed her lips.

"Then again, princesses are not faring too well these days. I hear three of them were beaten half to death by some vicious scoundrel today."

Sunny coughed, ignored the jab, and looked at Cassie.

"Anything else?"

She slowly shook her head.

"Nothing that I can see."

He sighed.

That made it easier, then.

If the change that had happened to Rain was not connected to her Aspect or her True Name…

Then it only left one possibility.

Something that even Cassie could not see… at least not yet, as a Saint.

It seemed that Rain had attained her Flaw.

Chapter-2031: Blessings of the Cursed

Sunny quietly wondered what to do next.

He had hoped for a different conclusion — but of course, the actual issue just had to be the only thing that Cassie was unable to see. Nothing could ever be easy.

Rain's very own Flaw…

He sighed.

In and of itself, attaining a Flaw was not a bad thing. Sure, most people saw Flaws as curses bestowed upon them by the Nightmare Spell to balance out the awesome powers they received. But he had lived long enough, and had seen enough, to know that it was not entirely true.

Firstly, Flaws did not come from the Spell — it just helped Awakened find them, just like it helped Awakened unseal their Aspects.

Secondly, Flaws were the manifestation of one of the absolute laws of existence, the law of imperfection, which had been created by the gods as one of the weapons — perhaps the last weapon — in their war against the Void.

Albeit cruel, Flaws were meant to help those who accepted their burden grow. Life was a struggle, after all, and perfect things could never improve. They were still and unchanging, which was no different from being dead.

That was what Ananke had said, and despite wanting to protest these words, Sunny could not disagree due to his own experience.

So, Flaws were more benign than malignant in nature… or at least they were supposed to be.

They were still no different from a curse for people suffering their cruelty, though.

Sunny remembered a few of the more terrible Flaws he had encountered. Nephis, Cassie, and himself… these Flaws were terrible enough, and they weren't even the most appalling.

He remembered how Caster had looked right before dying. That Flaw was quite dire, albeit also quite easily avoided — all the person cursed by it had to do was to forsake their Aspect powers.

Of course, if Caster had been someone willing to abandon his pride and sense of duty to his clan, he would not have been given such a Flaw.

Sunny also remembered Dorn, whose continuously growing body would have eventually killed him, collapsing under its own weight.

He remembered Jet.

And many others...

His expression turned somber.

Yes, from the point of view of a god, a Flaw wasn't a curse. But from the point of view of a human, it could very well be.

So, knowing that Rain had unexpectedly found hers did nothing to calm his nerves.

'What can it be?'

Sunny tried not to let his imagination come up with terrifying answers and shifted his attention to something more important — finding a way to actually learn what Rain's Flaw was.

It was not unsolvable.

Flaws were never random, after all. They were also deeply connected

to who the people cursed by them were, having to do with something fundamental about them.

Sometimes, a Flaw would be in direct opposition to the very core of a person's identity. Sometimes, it would take something they held dear and twist it in a hideous way. Sometimes, a Flaw had nothing to do with one's personality, but was instead connected to the nature of one's power, or even their fate…

In any case, it was not impossible to simply deduce a Flaw as long as you knew that person well enough.

And there were few people in the world who knew Rain better than Sunny did.

He studied her for a few moments, then said in a pensive tone:

"Tell me exactly what happened back then. How it happened from your point of view, I mean."

Rain suddenly seemed embarrassed. Her lively expression dimmed, and she looked away

"Well…"

Her voice sounded hesitant.

Eventually, Rain sighed and shrugged.

"It was all like a nightmare. I had never killed a person, you know? At least… I don't think I had. But then I clashed with that girl, Telle of White Feather, and it was either her or me."

She grew quiet and turned her face away.

"In the end, I managed to overpower her, and all that remained was to drive a knife into her neck. But I sort of… was a bit out of it, and could not really understand what for. Why must I kill her? That was what I thought. In fact, I felt deeply disgusted by… all of it."

Rain grimaced and shook her head.

"It was stupid and cowardly, I know. If I was in a better state, I would have remembered that sparing her life meant risking not only my own, but also that of Tamar… and others. But, well, I wasn't. All I knew was that I didn't want to kill her, and so, I made a choice not to."

She sighed again.

"And, to be honest… it felt like the right choice. It still does. Of course, that might just be because Lady Nephis arrived before I could pay for my mistake."

Sunny stared at her, thinking.

He had witnessed the fight between Rain and Telle, as well. More than that, he had been embracing Rain as a shadow throughout the battle, so he had felt everything she had.

So, he had his own impression of what had happened, too.

Sunny knew Rain. He knew what event had become the catalyst of her Flaw.

And he also knew how the world usually worked, as well.

So, if he imagined the worst possible outcome considering all that…

His gaze darkened.

There was a seed of a very uncomfortable idea taking root in his mind.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then glanced at Rain and said:

"Summon your bow."

She seemed confused, but outstretched her hand and called upon the Beast of Prey. Cassie tilted her head a little, as if confused by his request.

Meanwhile, the shadows at the edges of the clearing stirred.

Soon, there was the sound of buzzing, and an abominable insect that resembled an oversized mosquito flew into the clearing, as if trying to escape something.

However, it did not manage to fly far.

An inky-black hand rose from the ground, catching it between its fingers. Sharp claws cut the creature's wings and pierced its body — just deep enough to prevent the vermin from escaping, but not to kill it.

That was Rain's job.

Looking at her, Sunny lingered for a moment, then said:

"Go on, shoot it."

She studied the desperately struggling mosquito, then nocked an arrow on the string of her bow.

And froze, not doing anything.

Sunny frowned.

"What are you doing? Hurry up and kill it!"

But Rain remained motionless, simply holding her bow and looking at the abominable thing.

Eventually, she lowered her gaze.

"...I can't."

Sunny's frown deepened.

"What do you mean, you can't? Are you still out of sorts because of the battle? Listen, I can understand why you spared Telle… I'm glad that you did, actually. But that was a person. This is an abomination."

Rain looked at him, her face terrible pale.

"No, you don't get it. I can't."

She trembled.

"My hand won't move. I tell it to draw the string, but nothing happens."

A moment later, she moved the bow to the side, drew it, and sent the arrow flying — it whistled past the vermin without doing any damage to it and disappeared into the jungle.

Rain looked at her hand, frightened and confused.

Sunny stared at his sister with wide eyes.

Then, his face fell.

"...Crap."

Chapter-2032: These Three Words

Sunny had hoped that his initial guess was wrong.

Perhaps there was a limit to Rain's Flaw… something like only being unable to kill those who were defenseless, weaker than her, or maybe those who did not represent a fatal threat.

Perhaps it was even dependent on whether she believed that the enemy deserved to die… although that one had been disproven almost immediately, since there was no sane reason to show mercy to a Nightmare Creature.

However, after capturing a few more abominations and forcing Rain to confront them, he had to admit the shocking truth.

[You cannot kill.]

Sunny was not the Nightmare Spell, but if he were, he would have described her Flaw with these three words.

As the truth dawned upon the three people gathered on the clearing, they remained silent for a while, each trying to cope with the stunning revelation.

Sunny felt as if he had been smacked in the head with something heavy.

He was dismayed.

'What kind of Flaw is that?!'

He had seen many cruel Flaws, but none that were as restrictive and ridiculous as this one.

It was one thing to be unable to kill people…

It was a completely different thing to be unable to kill anything in this perilous, dying world, where every day was a desperate struggle for survival.

Where Nightmare Gates were opening in the middle of peaceful cities, unspeakable horrors stirred at the borders of human enclaves, and the cradle of humanity was being slowly consumed by the Dream Realm piece by piece.

Not to mention that they were in the middle of a damn Realm War!

Suppressing a desire to groan, he brushed his hair back and forced out a mildly reassuring smile.

"...Don't fret about it. So, you can't kill anything. Who cares? Most people in the world don't go around killing things, anyway. Not only mundane people, but many Awakened too. Take Aiko, for example… she had not summoned a combat Memory in years."

Granted, Aiko was only able to stay away from bloodshed because she had already spilled enough blood on the Forgotten Shore. If she had been sent there while unable to defend herself, she would not have survived long.

And she also had him around, which was no small part of it.

Rain, who was sitting on the ground with a lost expression, raised her head and stared at him.

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

She lingered for a moment, and then gritted her teeth.

"I'm a damn soldier! I am an Awakened member of the Song Army! We're at war!"

Rain covered her face for a moment.

"What am I supposed to do now that I can't even shoot my bow?"

Sunny hesitated, not knowing what to answer.

Eventually, he said:

"I can… steal you away. You don't need to remain a soldier, you know. Others can't desert, because there's nowhere to run in Godgrave, but you can."

Rain pierced him with a heated gaze, making it seem as if he had said something wrong.

'Damnation…'

Luckily, Cassie came to his help.

She had remained silent before, but now spoke in a soft tone:

"Rain, you are really asking the wrong person."

Rain glanced at her and raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? How so?"

Cassie smiled.

"Did you not see? He is a monster on the battlefield. His power is beyond all reason… so, naturally, he would have had few opportunities to experience being unable to kill something that he really wanted to kill."

She pointed to herself.

"But I have. After all, my Aspect is quite unsuitable for combat, and my Flaw made me blind. I had to learn how to face adversity despite my Flaw, and so, I am in a better position to give you advice."

Rain lingered for a few moments, looking at her heavily.

Then, she shifted her gaze to Sunny.

"Is it true? Does your Flaw not… restrict you in combat?"

He smiled wryly.

"Not usually, no… but you don't have to be polite. You can just ask me what it is."

Rain hesitated a little, then couldn't help herself and asked:

"So, what is it?"

Sunny stared at her silently for a while.

Eventually, he scoffed.

"It's simple, really. I can't lie."

Rain laughed.

She even slapped her knee a few times.

But under his calm gaze, her laughter slowly died out.

"No, wait… really? That is impossible. I mean, all the stuff you told me… no, wait. Really?!"

Sunny smiled.

"It's true. I can't speak a single lie aloud."

He pointed to her.

"However, I managed to fool you into thinking that I was spouting lies, didn't I? And keep the truth from you for many years."

Rain stared at him with wide eyes, then nodded.

Sunny nodded, too.

"That is how Flaws work. They are an insurmountable challenge… however, climbing over a mountain is not the only way to get to where you want to go. You can also go around the mountain — and you can work around the Flaw, too."

Cassie lowered her hand to the hilt of the Quiet Dancer and added in soft, but confident tone:

"It just takes time and effort. You will learn how to go where you want to go despite the Flaw, as well — there are many ways, as long as you have the will. For example, although you can't kill a Nightmare Creature, you can wound it. You can immobilize and debilitate it. With enough foresight, you can win a fight before it even starts, or even avoid it entirely."

She lingered for a moment, and then added:

"In that regard, your talent for the Sorcery of Names will be a boon. Shapers wield quite a versatile array of powers, including many that can restrain and restrict — that are not only meant for destruction, but also creation."

Cassie sighed.

"Remember that you are not alone. We will help you as much as we can. But you must also remember that, at the end of the day, only you can learn how to live with your Flaw."

Rain looked at her with gratitude, seemingly reassured.

Then, her gaze shifted to the corpses of the Nightmare Creatures sprawled across the clearing — Sunny had killed them after she failed to do so, thus ensuring her safety.

Her gaze became bleak again.

Feeling her dejection, he shook his head.

"Don't look just at the negative side. Look at the bright side, as well."

Rain raised an eyebrow, unconvinced.

"...There's a bright side?"

Sunny nodded.

"Of course. The Flaw is an important part of you… of your strength,

even. So important that without it, no one can become a Transcendent. There is a reason why the Nightmare Spell helps every Awakened attain their Flaw."

He paused for a moment, then added:

"It is not only because diamonds are made under pressure, or some such nonsense. It is also because one's Aspect and one's Flaw are innately tied. In fact, I am not entirely sure that it is even possible to unseal one's Aspect without first finding one's Flaw… so, you are now much closer to unsealing yours. Knowing your True Name is another step in the right direction."

Sunny smiled.

"In short, it might seem like you were cast down into a bottomless abyss, and all your struggles to attain strength have been for naught. But in truth, it's the opposite… you have climbed to a much greater height compared to where you were yesterday. So, give yourself some credit."

Rain remained silent for a while, looking at him with a hint of tentative hope.

However, it did not look as if she was entirely convinced.

In the end, she seemed to retreat into herself and looked down.

"...Tamar must have finished talking to her dad a long time ago. The army will be marching north soon. So... bring me back, please."

Sunny glanced at Cassie, then sighed.

"As you wish. Just remember… our Shadow Clan has a very magnificent Citadel here in Godgrave. Say a word, and I'll bring you there instead."

He almost hoped that she would, but Rain remained silent.

Taking her hand, Sunny pulled her into the shadows.

Cassie remained alone on the clearing.

A few moments later, the Lord of Shadows emerged from the darkness and looked at her somberly.

"Well?"

The blind seer sighed.

"Let's return, as well. There is a lot to do."

Chapter-2033: Dire Flaw

Sunny and Rain returned to the temporary camp of the Song Army.

While Sunny and Cassie returned to the temporary camp of the Sword Army.

Of course, he had not forgotten to retrieve his shadows first.

He allowed the haughty shadow, which wore Weaver's Mask, to dissolve into darkness and manifested the naughty shadow instead.

This avatar wore a mask, as well — this one woven by Sunny himself.

'I guess I need to craft more of these…'

Now that his ability to control several incarnations was out in the open, he would have more chances to summon them. During the battle, he had simply covered their faces with the helmet of the Onyx Mantle and a layer of shadows — it should have hidden their features, especially considering the surrounding mayhem.

But he could not be entirely sure, since there were all kinds of watchers out there.

Even if his identity remained a complete mystery, Master Sunless would still be suspected by some. After all, he had entered Changing Star's circle around the same time as the Lord of Shadows — now that people knew that the Lord of Shadow could exist in several places at the same time, they would naturally become suspicious of the humble Memory merchant.

Luckily, Sunny had been quite meticulous in crafting the persona of Master Sunless, and making it the exact opposite of what one would expect a fearsome and mysterious Saint to be. As long as he remained cautious, the suspicions would remain just that.

All of it was going to lose meaning soon, anyway.

The conclusion of the war was not that far away now.

He shivered.

Sunny and Cassie were alone in the tent for the moment. Both remained silent for a while, contemplating the situation Rain had found herself in.

Eventually, he sighed.

"That… is quite a severe Flaw, don't you think?"

Calling that Flaw severe was an understatement of the century.

Cassie hesitated for a moment, then nodded.

"It is quite extraordinary, indeed. There are very few Flaws that are that harsh while being that broad."

It could very well be a death sentence. Being unable to kill anything while everything was able to kill you was, needless to say, extremely dangerous. Especially for an Awakened, and especially in the middle of a bloody war… which was happening in the middle of a damn Death Zone!

Sunny massaged his temples, feeling an approaching headache.

How was he supposed to protect Rain now?

He sighed.

"Still, it is not so bad."

There were ways to deal with a Flaw. Every Awakened had no choice but to find ways of coping with its burden, and many learned how to do it masterfully.

The only question was…

How would Rain go about it?

Would she cope with her Flaw by accommodating it and adapting to its demands? She could distance herself from bloodshed and killing, living a peaceful life somewhere safe… relatively safe, at least, since true safety did not exist anywhere in either of the worlds.

Sunny would be quite happy if she did, really. His sister... was unlike him. Despite her admirable strength and tough exterior, she was made from softer stuff. She was not a killer.

...Thank the gods. There were already enough killers in this dying world — like Sunny and Nephis. People like them were born to destroy, and hopefully, they would destroy everything that needed to be destroyed. So that people like Rain could rebuild a new world on the ruins.

But that was only one way of dealing with her Flaw Rain could choose.

She could also stay close to the battlefield while assuming a strictly supportive role — like her friend Fleur, but much more defenseless. She would have to put absolute trust in her companions, then, and rely on them to keep her safe. Like a living embodiment of the time-tested principle taught to Sunny by Jet.

That no one survived in the Dream Realm alone.

Or…

Would Rain cope with her Flaw by fighting and rebelling against it like Sunny had fought and rebelled against his?

He had become a master of deception despite being unable to lie, after all. It was just that his treacherous ways had to turn much more refined and insidious because of the Flaw.

Would Rain become a ghastly and sinister slayer because of hers? A person who could not kill her enemies… at least not directly… but made them wish that they were dead?

Sunny closed his eyes for a moment, then cursed.

"No, I take it back. It is that bad."

Cassie patted him on the shoulder.

"Don't worry too much. She will be fine… better than fine, actually. She will face the challenge of her Flaw, overcome it, and become much stronger for it."

Sunny did not know if Cassie was speaking out of personal experience or simply trying to placate him, but he felt thankful either way.

He wanted to believe her, too.

She remained silent for a moment, and then sighed:

"Nevertheless, you are right. Her Flaw is extremely severe… which means that her Aspect will be extraordinary, as well. In fact, I am quite sure that it will be at least of the Supreme Rank — most likely Sacred."

Sunny froze, looking at her with a complicated expression.

An Aspect of the Sacred Rank… was almost as rare as one of the Divine Rank.

In fact, ironically enough, Sunny knew of more Awakened wielding a Divine Aspect — Nephis, Mordret, and himself — than Awakened wielding a Sacred Aspect.

He only knew of one, actually… Cassie herself.

Of course, there could have been others… among the members of Broken Sword's cohort, for example, or among the daughters of Ki Song. But the fact still remained — a Sacred Aspect would be unique, mystical, and exceedingly powerful by its very nature.

And his sister could come to possess one of those?

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then sat down and said somberly:

"Tell me more about what you saw."

Cassie remained silent for a while, as if trying to find the correct words.

In the end, she sighed.

"It was quite unusual. I had to decipher what I saw myself… I still do, really. It is not really difficult, just takes time. Like… like following your intuition to the answer you already know to be true, or remembering something that you had already known once. We will be able to decipher the True Name shortly, I believe. The Attributes responsible for her affinity to shadows and sorcery are also quite clear…"

Her tone changed a little.

"...It's the third Attribute that gives me pause."

Cassie grew quiet for a moment, then faced Sunny and asked cautiously:

"Sunny, tell me… have you noticed anything strange about your sister?"

Chapter-2034: What Are Friends For

Sunny stared at Cassie silently.

What the hell did she mean, anything strange?

Suddenly, manytroubling possibilities surfaced in his mind. There were all kinds of Attributes out there in the world, after all… the mind hex of the Soul Devourer had also been akin to an Attribute, for example.

Rain had not been supposed to possess three entire Attributes, anyway. The [Mark of Shadows] had come from him… was the third Attribute foreign to her, as well?

Finally, he shrugged.

"Strange? I mean, she is known as That Crazy Girl back in Ravenheart for a reason. But no, not really. Rain is… surprisingly normal. Shockingly normal, even — she is more or less the only normal person I know."

He frowned.

"What exactly do you mean by strange?"

Cassie contemplated her answer for some time before speaking.

"I'm not sure myself… have you seen some inexplicable things happening around her, or patterns of strange events? Like sudden changes in weather, plants wilting or blooming unexpectedly, or maybe Nightmare Creatures reacting more strongly than expected to her presence?"

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

No, really, what was she going on about?

Eventually, he said hesitantly:

"Well… come to think of it… a huge storm did appear out of nowhere when she was Awakening. Why?"

Cassie remained silent for a moment.

"That third Attribute I spoke about, it is quite unusual. I'll need more time to truly fathom it, but what I do know is that her soul is connected to the world much more deeply than that of a mere Awakened should be… or maybe it is the other way around? So, that storm might not have gathered by coincidence or as a response to her unusual Awakening. It could have been a way the world was responding to the intensity of her emotions."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"That kind of sounds like… presence?"

The world had a way of responding to Saints.

However, Rain was definitely not a Saint.

Cassie nodded.

"Indeed. In fact, I suspect that Rain already has a presence, much like a Transcendent would — it is just that her soul is so much weaker than that of a Saint that we have not felt her presence yet. Similarly… I also suspect that she already has a source element."

She remained silent for a few moments, as if doubting herself, and then added in a hesitant tone:

"To be honest, it felt like… all elements are her source element? Or maybe it's the other way around. Can a human soul itself be a source element? Gods… sorry, but I am really confused. All I can say right now is that her soul is very unique, deeply connected to the world, and inexplicably exhibiting traits similar to those of a Transcendent

despite being properly weak and fully contained within her body, like any Awakened soul should."

Sunny stared at her silently.

Then, he stared some more.

"...No matter how much you are confused, I am confused more."

Cassie chuckled, then sighed.

"Don't worry. I'll figure it out soon… sure, it sounds strange, but consider some other innate Attributes. I am sure those would have seemed bizarre to us if we glimpsed them for the first time without the Spell providing a comprehensive, convenient, and concise explanation."

Sunny thought about it.

Well, yes… if he looked at it like that, the innate Attributes of people with Aspects of higher Ranks would seem quite bizarre from the outside. Like his own [Fated] or Neph's [Dreamspawn].

Compared to those, the strangeness happening to Rain's soul seemed almost mild.

In any case, for now, the only thing he could do was wait for Cassie to decipher the full meaning... and worry.

Once the interpretation was complete, he would finally be able to finish the Memory bracelet he had been weaving for Rain.

She would be ready to decide what to do about her Flaw by then, as well…

Suddenly, Sunny felt a cold chill run down his spine.

'Her emotions might be able to affect the weather, huh?'

That was... a truly terrible trait to possess, here in Godgrave...

***

Rain did not quite remember how she found her way to her tent after being returned to the camp of the Song Army.

Only her tent wasn't there anymore.

The funeral rite had been long finished, and the army was preparing to march. Someone from the cohort — Tamar, most likely — had already taken down Rain's tent. Usually they handled their own equipment, but since one member of the cohort was strangely absent, she would have done it to save time.

Speaking of Tamar, the Legacy girl was standing near the smoldering campfire, giving last instructions to the leaders of the cohorts comprising the centuria.

Noticing Rain, she frowned and sent them away.

"Where have you been?"

Rain stared at her friend numbly, then waved a hand dismissively.

"Just running errands around the camp. Nothing… important."

Her lies were usually more thoughtful and better acted out, but this time, Tamar saw through the clumsy attempt at deception easily.

Her frown deepened.

"Rani, what's the matter? Are you alright?"

Rain simply looked at her, wondering…

Could she just tell Tamar the truth?

Surely, not. A Flaw was something that most Awakened kept a secret from everyone — especially a Flaw like her own, which could be fatal if it fell into the hands of an enemy.

But, on the other hand, how could she not tell Tamar?

Tamar was her friend, companion, and captain. They were both soldiers fighting in a deadly war… Rain relied on Tamar to have her

back, and Tamar did the same.

But Rain couldn't protect Tamar's back anymore. How could she keep it a secret?

She forced out a smile.

"Listen, Tamar…"

How was she going to explain it?

Rain shifted from one foot to another awkwardly.

"I thought about it for a while. And I decided… to become a pacifist…"

That was both as good and as terrible of an explanation as any.

The Legacy girl stared her down with a dark expression.

Then, she raised an eyebrow slightly.

"Have you lost your mind?"

'Damn it, damn it, damn it…'

Rain took a deep breath.

What else was she supposed to say?

"Ah, screw it. Actually, I attained my Flaw. My Flaw is that I can't kill anyone, or anything… not even Nightmare Creatures. There! I said it!"

Tamar scowled.

No, but why was she frowning and scowling so much? She was going to get wrinkles! Spoiling that face would be a travesty!

Failing to distract herself with these childish thoughts, Rain mustered her courage and prepared for the inevitable rebuke.

But Tamar just said evenly:

"So what?"

Rain blinked.

"Huh? I said…"

But the Legacy girl interrupted her.

"Yeah, I heard what you said. So what? If you can't kill things, don't kill them. Aim for their eyes, knee joints, sword arms, and any other appendage that doesn't seem vital. With your miraculous archery skills, that should not be a problem, right?"

Rain stared at her silently for a moment, then said slowly:

"...Right."

Tamar nodded curtly.

"Then do that. I'll kill them for you."

With that, she turned around and walked away to prepare the centuria for the departure.

Rain was left standing near the campfire alone, utterly stumbled.

…And utterly touched.

Was it that simple?

Eventually, a pale smile illuminated her face.

'...I'll kill them for you.'

That was possibly the most heartwarming thing that anyone had ever told her…

Chapter-2035: Two Crossings

Not long after the Godheart Battle was over, the Song army abandoned its temporary camp on the vast expanse of the Breastbone Reach and started its long and arduous march north.

At this point, the enemies had proven their superiority. The warriors of the Raven Queen could not compete with the Sword Army in an open field — not as long as Changing Star and the Lord of Shadows were alive, at least.

So, they could only retreat.

The situation was not hopeless, though, and the retreat was not aimless. It had two strategic goals that could very well bring the Song Domain victory in the next battle, or the battle after that.

The first goal of returning north was quite obvious — there, they would gain terrain advantage. The Song Army could not overcome the enemy in a frontal clash, but things would be different if there were complicated terrain and fearsome fortifications involved in the equation.

The forces of Song had established two impressive strongholds on both crossings from the northern tip of the Breastbone Reach to the West Collarbone Plain — one direct, and the other one via the Western First Rib. Laying siege to either of the crossings would be a perilous task for the Sword Army, no doubt…

And there was the second strategic goal of the retreat, as well.

This one was more mystical.

The swath of the titanic breastbone where the Battle of Godheart had taken place was located on the invisible boundary between the two clashing Domains. There, the power of the Sovereigns was at a

balance.

Now, however, the situation would change. The Song Army was retreating, and therefore, the sphere of influence of the Song Domain would shrink, while the sphere of influence of the Sword Domain would expand. All that the King of Swords had to do to claim this territory was conquer the scattered extermination outposts established by the enemy on the surface of the sun-bleached bone.

He would become the sole ruler of the Breastbone Reach soon…

His Domain would not reach the western collarbone of the dead god, though, where the Citadel of Ki Song were located. Her power would be fully expressed at the two crossings, while his would be at its weakest.

So, the Song Army was determined to defend them at all costs. It had a good chance of succeeding, as well.

But the King of Swords was undeterred. And so, his army set out in pursuit.

The longer it took for the Sword Army to arrive at the two crossings, the better the soldiers of the Song Domain would be able to entrench themselves and prepare for the siege. So, there was no time to waste… perhaps Anvil wished to maintain the forceful momentum of the triumphant victory at Godheart, as well, hoping to smash through the enemy defenses and march straight to the Collarbone Citadel.

Ki Song knew this, of course, so it was inevitable that she would try to slow the Sword Army down.

There would be ambushes and countless skirmishes between the soldiers of the two Domains, no doubt…

Worse than that, there was a very simple tactic she could employ to sabotage the speed of the advancing enemy forces.

It was to destroy the extermination outposts as her own army retreated, like the armies of the ancient times burned the fields and poisoned the wells as they passed.

The extermination outposts were like seals that humanity had placed on the abominable jungle, preventing it from escaping to the surface from the humid twilight of the Hollows again. They were fortresses built around the fissures in the ancient bone, garrisoned with soldiers whose task it was to destroy the tendrils of the scarlet infestation every time it reached out from the darkness.

As the Song Army retreated across the territory it had subjugated in the past, these garrisons were retrieved, and the fortresses were destroyed. With nothing containing the ancient jungle in the depths anymore, it crawled out of the dark fissures to hungrily absorb sunlight and warmth once again.

The return of the scarlet infestation was like an explosion of abominable life. Its taint covered the sun-bleached surface of the bone with dire speed, and myriads of Nightmare Creatures were born in an instant — most to be consumed, some to gorge themselves on the flesh and souls of their fallen brethren and grow with startling speed.

By the time the Sword Army reached where the enemy had passed, they were often met by vast wealds of thick vermilion growth.

The islands of the abominable jungle had to be tamed and burned down once again, the extermination outposts had to be restored, and new Awakened garrisons had to be left behind to guard the fissures. Therefore, the Sword Army was losing both time and manpower while advancing north.

There was another matter it was dealing with, as well…

The fallout of the Godheart Battle and the punishment that the King had delivered to Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan for her defiance.

His punishment… was not that harsh, really. She was stripped of her position as the commander of the Sword Army, with Anvil assuming the role personally, and sent back to the main camp to oversee the complicated logistical task of shifting the established supply chains in preparation for the inevitable siege of the two crossings.

Basically, she was being slapped on the wrist and sent to her room, to be grounded for a few weeks.

However, the soldiers were still unhappy.

Not only were they still reeling from the horror and senselessness of the recent battle, but they also had to witness the person who had saved their lives and delivered victory to the Sword Domain being admonished and demoted — instead of honored and praised.

Some saw it as an injustice and were quietly incensed, while some were simply confused.

Why was the King sending one of his most powerful warriors away?

What would happen if the Queen of Worms decided to turn her army around and attack? Would the Sword Army fare well with only the Lord of Shadows standing between it and the superior number of enemy Saints?

…Would the Lord of Shadows even do anything now that the person who had brought him under the banner of the Sword Domain was humiliated and punished like that?

They were blowing the symbolic punishment out of proportion, of course.

But Sunny was not going to dissuade them.

In fact, it was exactly what he had wanted to achieve.

It was also quite a fortunate turn of events, for Nephis to be sent to the main camp.

With her speed, she would be arriving there quite soon… and when she did, they would be able to decipher Rain's True Name away from the prying eyes of the two Sovereigns.

They would be able to attempt forging her sword, too.

...Well, and do some other things as well.

Honestly, he couldn't wait.

Chapter-2036: Promised Storm

Rain was laying on top of her bedroll, too tired to move. The interior of her tent was like an oven, and the merciless sky was pummeling the world with heat outside. The mere thought of the radiant expanse of the sun-bleached bone, which seemed to glow like snow in the pouring sunlight, made her eyes ache for the comfort of shadows.

Which was why the flap of her tent was closed, submerging the interior into a comfortable dimness. The passive enchantment of one of Rain's Memories kept her cool, and she could finally breathe.

The past few days had been… challenging.

The Song Army had set out north, marching at a truly punishing pace. They had to escape the pursuing enemy, sure, but the soldiers had not even had the chance to recover from the battle. Enduring the dire hardship of the hellish march immediately after that calamity was like a cruel torture.

Everyone was slowly breaking under the strain…

It wasn't easy to break Awakened, but Godgrave was just the place to accomplish that.

The situation was only made worse by how disheartening it felt to be destroying the extermination outposts as the army retreated north. They had fought long and hard to establish them, after all — battling the scarlet jungle was a harrowing affair, but it had felt rewarding. As if they were banishing something vile and odious into darkness to build a place under the sun for humanity.

What did it feel like to dismantle these outposts with their own hands, then?

The Seventh Legion had destroyed only one, so far. It had to be done

in a rush, so the fortress had been set on fire immediately after the garrison evacuated. Luckily, the most widely available building material in Godgrave was wood, and the flames spread quickly.

It was not quick enough, though. The Blood Sisters surrounded the burning outposts and bombarded it with ranged attacks, reducing the fortress to rubble. What had taken weeks of battling the dreadful jungle and enormous effort to build was reduced to a smoldering pile of charred debris in a matter of minutes.

As the soldiers watched the scene of destruction in grim silence, it was hard not to feel as if all the blood, sweat, and tears they had spilled were for nothing.

By the time the legion moved on from the blackened ruin, the first scarlet vines were already crawling out of the fissure.

'Damn it all.'

Rain shifted and glanced at the deep shadows nestling in the corners of the tent. It was so hot inside…

After remaining silent for a while, she said in a low tone:

"You know… you can already make cooling enchantments. Why don't you enchant the whole tent, while you're at it?"

There was silence for a few moments, and then, a chuckle came out of the shadows.

"Mostly because it would take time away from more important matters. Why don't you learn runic sorcery and enchant the tent yourself?"

Rain smiled in the darkness.

"I just might. Can I really learn it?"

A familiar figure emerged from the shadows, sitting down on the floor of the tent. He shrugged.

"I don't see why not… a friend once told me that it would take no

more than a century, but with your apparent talent, it should be much faster. A few decades, at most."

Rain sighed.

"...Figures."

Then, she studied him with a neutral expression.

"Why did you come out?"

Sunny smiled.

"I have something for you. Give me your hand."

Still laying on the bedroll, Rain outstretched a hand. He took it gently with his own and raised the other one. A moment later, a beautiful bracelet forged from black silver manifested itself from strands of darkness, and he put it around her wrist.

Rain studied the bracelet with curiosity. It felt cool to the touch, contrasted starkly against her smooth alabaster skin. The craftsmanship was beautiful, and the fit was flawless.

"It's pretty. But what is it?"

He let go of her hand and leaned back a little.

"A Memory. Bind it, then think about wanting to know your state."

A new Memory was always a welcome surprise. Rain sat up, infused the beautiful bracelet with her essence, waited for it to take hold, and then thought about… her state.

'What state is he even talking about? Like… tired, sweaty, and miserable?'

However, in the next moment, a field of shimmering runes suddenly ignited in the air in front of her.

Rain froze.

"Is… is this?"

He nodded.

"Yes. It is something I came up with for myself after being cut off from the Spell. It is not nearly as omniscient and only has rudimentary functions, of course, but it's still handy to have around."

Rain smiled.

So these were the infamous runes… strangely enough, seeing them suddenly made her feel like a real Awakened.

It was just that reading them was another matter entirely.

Sunny had taught her the basics of the more widely spread dead languages of the Dream Realm in the past four years, and especially the original runic language that the Spell used. It was a necessity — after all, they had been aiming to make her an Awakened without becoming infected by the Spell, which meant that it would not be providing her any translations.

Luckily, Rain had turned out to be quite talented at languages. So, she could read the runes… in theory. She just had little practice actually doing it.

Still, she was incredibly curious to learn what the bracelet would tell her.

So, Rain remembered her lessons and glanced at the shimmering runes.

They read:

Name: Rain.

True Name…

She concentrated.

'Promise… Promised? Promised Storm?'

No. The runes were similar, but if one studied them carefully, a different meaning revealed itself.

There was a stormy darkness to her name, a vivid image of the vast black sky. But there was also a glimmer of hope to it, a promise that the darkness would be dispelled, and a glimpse of a beautiful light shining somewhere far away.

There was also a hint of melancholy to her name, because relief and light were still far in the distance.

Rain looked at the runes once again and read them properly this time.

True Name: Promise of a Distant Sky.

Chapter-2037: Spirit Sea

Rain rolled the words on her tongue.

Promise of a Distant Sky…

It was a beautiful True Name, if not as fierce and fearsome as most other True Names were.

The name felt unfamiliar, but strangely comforting. Like a piece of the puzzle that she had not known was missing from her soul, and now finally fell into its place, thus making her soul more… complete.

'What a strange feeling.'

Sunny studied her expression with a hint of curiosity.

"I'm guessing you are thinking about your True Name?"

Rain nodded.

"Yeah. I like it… I think. It's pretty."

It was also not at all what she had expected. Such a pretty name did not seem to fit her… her life had been anything but pretty, after all. In fact, it had mostly been crawling through mud, slaughtering Nightmare Creatures, and witnessing indescribable horrors here in Godgrave as of late.

Her brother chuckled.

"Indeed it is."

He grew quiet for a few moments, and then added in a more serious tone:

"Names have power, Rain. A quite literal power — you will learn

about it while studying Shaping — but a more obscure power, as well. A True Name is an anchor of one's self, and knowing yourself is the first step of walking the Path of Ascension."

She smiled.

"What is the next step?"

Sunny seemed to be surprised by the question. He remained silent for a moment before answering.

"The next step… is imposing yourself upon the world. But you don't have to worry about that just yet."

He sighed.

"In any case, do not reveal your True Name to anyone — at least for now. Others share it freely, but you might have noticed that some do not… like Seishan, for example. Or the Sovereigns. That is because they understand more than the rest, and they understand that while making your name be known might be a powerful boon, it can also become a curse."

Rain considered his words for a few moments.

It made sense, in a way. She already knew that there was a Sorcery of Names, and that Names had power. Therefore, wouldn't a powerful Shaper be able to make someone powerless by using their True Name, or otherwise gain power over that person?

Rain did not know enough about Shaping to be sure of her conclusion, yet, but she had not been planning to share her True Name with anyone either. After all, her Awakening and her very existence were highly unusual — she did not need to attract any undue attention.

Sunny stared at her silently for a while, then added in a somber tone:

"Don't go around telling everyone what your Flaw is, either. I get it, you had to tell Tamar… but show some discernment and restraint, will you? You know how vulnerable you are because of that Flaw."

Rain grinned.

"I wasn't planning on telling anyone else, anyway. Well, for now… maybe Ray and Fleur, in the future…"

He waved a hand dismissively, an irritated expression on his face.

"Whatever. Do as you wish… go on, read the rest of the runes."

Rain was still trying out the sound of her True Name, but she was also curious to see what else the beautiful bracelet could show her.

So, she turned back to the runes.

Name: Rain.

True Name: Promise of a Distant Sky.

Rank: Awakened.

Soul Core: [564/1000], [237/5000].

Rain stared at that last string of runes in confusion.

She knew what the first counter meant — that was obviously the measure of her soul core saturation. She had been in Godgrave for several months now, having participated in many battles. Her contributions had not been modest, either, which meant that she was awarded with plenty of soul shards.

Rain had been keeping a mental score, of course, and the result was almost identical to what the runes were showing. Even without counting, she could feel how much stronger she had become since Awakening.

But what the hell was that second number?

Two hundred and thirty-seven… out of five thousand? What did it mean?

She looked at Sunny with a silent, but quite loud question in her eyes.

He chuckled.

"Ah… that. Your soul core is a bit special, you see."

He lingered for a few moments, then said in a contemplative tone:

"There are some Awakened with unique soul constitutions. For example, I know a woman whose soul core can grow continuously, unrestrained by the limitations that most Awakened share. I know people who can form multiple soul cores akin to Nightmare Creatures, as well. You, however, are different."

Her brother scratched the back of his head.

"It is hard to explain, considering that I don't understand it fully myself yet. Let us just say that your soul is deeply connected to the essence of the world. Thus, you have access to a… a form of spirit essence. That spirit essence does not saturate your soul core directly, and, therefore, it does not make your body stronger. But it is still under your control."

Rain's eyes widened as she came to a realization.

"Wait… is that why my Soul Sea looks like that?"

Her Soul Sea was not at all like the books described. Its surface was indeed like an endless sea, and there was indeed a beautiful sun — the representation of her soul core — hanging high above the water, with little lights representing her Memories orbiting around it.

Or at least that was how it had been before.

However, over time, something had changed, and the radiant sun became surrounded and partially obscured by aimlessly drifting clouds. There were just a few of them, for now, but she had noticed that their number was growing.

Her Soul Sea already looked a bit grey and stormy, with cool winds disturbing the surface of the clear water.

Sunny nodded.

"Indeed. Those clouds are the representation of the spirit essence you've been able to accumulate. I am not sure how you can absorb more, exactly — that, you will have to discover by yourself. Searching for a way to deepen your connection to the world should be the correct direction, I think."

He smiled meaningfully.

"Needless to say, it would be very beneficial for you to accumulate as much spirit essence as possible…"

Chapter-2038: Soul of a Poet

Sunny smiled.

"Needless to say, it would be very beneficial for you to accumulate as much spirit essence as possible — the deeper your reserves of it are, the better. Not to mention that we don't know how saturating your soul with spirit essence will benefit the eventual transformation of your soul core. It might very well be a boon during your Ascension."

Then, his smile dimmed, replaced by a serious expression.

"Do note one thing, though. This bond between your soul and the world is a connection that goes both ways. So while you are able to absorb spirit essence from the world, you can also… leak it, I guess. In fact, a little bit of it seems to be seeping out all the time, more so when you are in the throes of strong emotions. So, get a grip and don't go around irrigating the world with your soul essence, causing random storm clouds to gather… or clear, especially here in Godgrave."

Rain stared at him incredulously.

Deepen her connection to the world? Accumulate more spirit essence? Get a grip and keep it contained within her soul?

Random storms?

What… the hell was he talking about?

What even was spirit essence?

She narrowed her eyes.

"And how am I supposed to do that, pray tell?"

Sunny grinned mischievously:

"How should I know? I have no idea. I can estimate the numerical value of the spirit essence contained within your soul because of the Mark of Shadows, but at the end of the day… it's your soul!"

Rain sighed.

"Right."

So, she would have to figure it out herself.

'As if I do not have enough things to figure out myself already…'

Still, it was good news. Having more essence was indeed the dream of every Awakened… it would have been best if her soul core simply had an enormous capacity, thus improving her body six times over, but having an auxiliary reservoir of essence was also great news — especially considering that its maximum limit seemed to be vastly more generous than that of a soul core.

All this essence would probably come in handy when she started learning sorcery…

Still thinking about the fact that her soul was, apparently, more than a little bit weird, Rain turned her gaze back to the runes.

What she saw made her eyes sparkle.

It was the list of her Memories.

Memories: [Puppeteer's Shroud], [Beast of Prey], [Essence Quiver], [Bag of Withholding], [Green Canteen], [In Case of Emergency], [Heavy Burden], [Outskirts at Noon], [Don't Cut Yourself], [Pièce de Résistance], [Safety First], [Fancy Handy Bracelet].

She stared at that last one for a moment, then rolled her eyes and concentrated on the very first Memory.

New runes ignited in the air.

Memory: Puppeteer's Shroud.

Memory Rank: Awakened.

Memory Tier: VI.

Memory Type: Armor.

Memory Description: [A worm of doubt once found its way into a righteous king's heart. With time, the king was devoured from inside and became its puppet. A lifetime later, the Puppeteer Worm escaped from the king's dead body, leaving behind a cocoon of black silk. No one knows where it went; however, once people dared to approach the silent castle, they found the silk among the mountains of gnawed bones and fashioned it into an armor.]

Memory Enchantments: [Enhanced Durability], [Doubtless], [Blessing of Spirit].

She shivered.

That description… was not creepy at all!

Then, Rain glanced at her brother.

'...I guess I was wrong about him.'

He could come up with something meaningful to write, after all. That chilling story about the ancient king was both enthralling and poignant.

And she had a great advantage when compared to all other Awakened — her Fancy Handy Bracelet… no, she refused to call it that… not only showed her each enchantment a Memory possessed, but also described the effects of those enchantments in detail.

Trying not to think about giant moths, Rain shifted her gaze to the next Memory.

...Her brow creased a little.

Memory: Beast of Prey.

Memory Rank: Awakened.

Memory Tier: III.

Memory Type: Weapon.

Memory Description: [Bespoke enchanted bow, received in exchange for an exclusive Memory coupon in the Brilliant Emporium.]

She remained motionless for a bit, then shifted her gaze further down the list.

The crease of her brow deepened.

Memory: Essence Quiver.

Memory Rank: Awakened.

Memory Tier: II.

Memory Type: Tool.

Memory Description: [High-quality enchanted quiver, received as gratuity in the Brilliant Emporium. Buy one, get one free! Become a client today!]

Rain scowled deeply as she looked at the next Memory.

Memory: [Bag of Withholding]...

Memory Description: [I've really outdone myself this time, if I do say so myself. Anyway, why am I bothering with these descriptions? It takes essence to weave each letter!]

Rain sighed deeply, closed her eyes for a few moments, then stared at her brother with a strange expression.

He smiled.

"What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

She inhaled, slowly counting to ten in her mind.

Then, shaking her head, Rain shifted her gaze away from the list of her Memories and tried to concentrate on the rest of the runes.

'...I'll force him to rewrite these descriptions, even if it will be the

death of me!'

The runes read:

Echoes: —

Attributes: [Poet], [Godheart], [Mark of Shadows].

[Poet] Attribute Description: "Your soul is attuned to the melody of Names. The cadence of your heart gives shape to its will."

There was no surprise there.

[Godheart] Attribute Description: "Your heart is bonded deeply with the world."

Sunny had already explained this one when talking about her soul core. The choice of the name, though... was quite poignant, actually.

[Mark of Shadows] Attribute Description: "You are the Princess of Shadows, bearing the mark of their Lord. Shadows recognize you as one of their own."

A wide smile appeared on Rain's face against her will.

'So it's official now… I'm a princess!'

Her brother grinned.

"Of course you are."

Rain froze.

"W—wait… did I say that out loud?"

He laughed quietly.

"No… but it was written all over your face."

She threw a menacing glare at him, then turned back to the runes.

There were only a few strings left.

Aspect: —

Dream Realm Anchor: —

Flaw: [Crown of Thorns].

Flaw Description: [You cannot kill].

…And just like that, Rain's thoughts returned to her Flaw.

She sighed, covered the beautiful bracelet with the sleeve of the Puppeteer's Shroud, and lay back down.

Looking at the roof of her tent, Rain remained silent for a while, and then asked in a somber tone:

"Sunny, do you think... that it will be alright? The… all of it, I mean."

He did not answer immediately, looking at her from the darkness.

Eventually, a pale smile appeared on his lips.

Her brother nodded.

"Sure, it will. That's a promise."

Chapter-2039: Princess in the Ivory Tower

The tranquil silence of the Ivory Tower was disturbed by the clangor of steel.

The chilling litany of clashing blades echoed from the pristine white walls, and powerful gusts of wind battered them like siege rams. However, there was no battle raging under the roof of the great pagoda.

Instead, three figures moved across its floor in a graceful dance, wielding blades made of shadow against each other.

They were Nephis and Sunny — two incarnations of him, to be precise.

Changing Star had been sent away from the main force of the Sword Army, but the Fire Keepers were not. That, too, was part of her punishment… and although Sunny could see that she was concerned about her people, he was selfishly glad that they practically had the entire Ivory Island to themselves.

No one was here to disturb them, so they could spend time together however they wished.

And they had.

It felt strange, to enjoy warm days of contentment and bliss in the middle of a calamitous war, but he was not complaining… far from it. If anything, the dire threat of the looming war made every moment they spent together feel much more vivid and precious.

Especially because it also felt as if these were the last tranquil days they would get to enjoy before the inevitable storm.

There were all kinds of leisurely activities they had been up to since Nephis returned to the main camp... but today, they were subjecting themselves to a different kind of physical strain.

The battle was subdued, but their Transcendent Battle Arts had enough room to express themselves fully.

Sunny was enjoying the feeling of completion, freedom, and endless possibility his Art gave him. It was graceful, infinitely adaptable, fearsome, and — most of all — absolutely deadly. He had already tested its daunting potential during the Battle of Godheart, but some of his powers had been restricted then.

Of course, that was not really a detriment to his Art — on the contrary, it was an undeniable confirmation of its dire lethality and insidious design. His formless Art was flexible enough to serve him well even when placed under the harshest of restrictions, after all — just as he had intended it to be. That was one of its most dangerous aspects.

Now, however, there were no restrictions placed upon Sunny, which gave him a chance to experience the full repertoire of his Art.

Of course, Nephis herself was an astounding swordsman. No matter how deadly his Art was, Sunny was having trouble dealing with a nearly immortal opponent.

He was curious to know how the battle would have ended if both of them were serious about it, and were not restrained in the magnitude of power they released. What would happen if seven of his incarnations were here instead of only two? If Nephis fully unleashed her flames? If they didn't care about hurting each other or leaving their surroundings intact?

He was honestly not sure. The only thing he knew was that the main camp of the Sword Army would probably be erased from existence.

Sunny was enjoying himself, and he had a feeling that Nephis was enjoying herself too — even more than him, most likely. But of course, this spar was not simply for their enjoyment. It had a practical reason, as well.

In these few weeks before Nephis was once again recalled to the frontline… Sunny had to finish forging her sword.

He had been preparing for this moment for many months now, and a large part of his preparations had to do with studying how she fought. From spending time in the rented martial halls in Bastion to observing Nephis in actual battle, Sunny had learned a lot.

Today's duel was the final lesson, and he was absorbing it with all his being.

Finally, utterly exhausted, they stopped. Neither had won… not that achieving victory was a point.

Nephis smiled in contentment, wiped the sweat off her brow, and inhaled deeply. Her chest was heaving, proving how strenuous the spar had been.

And making Sunny's eyes wander.

"Your swordsmanship have changed."

There was curiosity in her voice, as well as a hint of approval.

A part of Sunny was surprised that she noticed.

…Most of him, however, was too preoccupied by being stirred by the sight of beads of sweat glistening on her ivory skin, her slightly flushed face, and the tantalizing contours of her body contoured by the light training clothes.

'Ah… I'm in trouble.'

There was too much for him to do today, and he could not allow himself to get distracted.

It was just that his self-control was faltering in the face of an overwhelming adversity.

Sunny nodded absentmindedly.

"Ah... yes. I rarely receive an opportunity to fully unleash my talents.

The recent events were one such opportunity, and it gave me the last push I needed to improve."

'Cold shower… right, that is what I need…'

Nephis studied him for a few moments, then asked in an amused tone:

"What are you thinking about?"

Sunny almost choked.

"Just that… uh... that we worked up a sweat. I was thinking that a cool shower won't hurt."

She looked at him, then smiled and stretched leisurely.

Sunny had already been struggling to contain himself, and that last bit of cruelly stimulating visual feast almost sent him over the edge. Suddenly, he was lucky that Blood Weave was there, preventing his blood from rushing to all the wrong places.

His eyes still turned fierce and hungry, though.

Nephis chuckled and offered in an innocent tone:

"Well… we can take a refreshing swim in the lake, if you want."

Of course, Sunny could not help but remember the last time they played in the water together, during the wonderful date at the beach. That swimsuit...

His pupils widened a little.

No, no… taking a swim in the lake was not going to help the situation one bit. If anything, it would make things ten times worse.

He remained silent for a while, then used all of his Transcendent willpower to slowly shake his head.

"No… I mean, yes! A hundred times, yes. But let's do it in the evening."

Nephis lingered for a moment, then shrugged.

She almost looked disappointed.

"As you wish. We do indeed have a lot to do today."

Regretting all his life choices, Sunny gave her a disheartened nod.

"Right. For now… let's just grab a quick bite and get to business."

The two of them separated briefly to refresh themselves, then met again at the beautiful gazebo behind the great pagoda. This was where the stone arch that had once led to the Ebony Tower was located — now that a vast distance separated the two flying islands, the connection between them was severed, and the portal could not be activated anymore.

Instead, a tastefully carved stone table was placed in the gazebo, which Sunny now set a light breakfast on.

The two of them enjoyed a delicious meal and a bit of invigorating wine while listening to the peaceful sound of rustling leaves that came from the nearby grove.

Sunny could not take his eyes off Nephis. Sitting there in the shade, wearing a simple white tunic, smiling slightly as she sipped cool wine… she simply looked too lovely.

She seemed to have mostly recovered from unleashing her Aspect during the battle, too — faster than usual.

It was good to see.

Noticing his gaze, Nephis smiled.

"So… are you going to explain what it was that you asked me to interpret, or not?"

Chapter-2040: Lack of Symmetry

Sunny felt a surge of emotion all of a sudden.

Not because it was a secret… he had told Rain to keep her True Name to herself, indeed, but that did not include Nephis. Being the one who had helped him and Cassie interpret the meaning, she already knew it, after all.

No, it was simply because she asked.

Recently, Sunny had noticed that Nephis almost never asked him anything. He knew it was partially because she was vaguely aware that he simply could not answer some questions, and respected his request to keep some of his secrets.

But he could not help but feel that it was also because she… simply did not care enough to ask.

Their current relationship was full of sparks… gods knew they weren't shy with sharing affection. In fact, with both of them being Saints, the last few days had been quite intense for the Ivory Tower.

They also enjoyed each other's company in the more peaceful moments. There was mutual trust and respect, and quite a bit of tenderness between them.

It was like a dream come true. It felt much more wonderful than he had ever dreamed of, even.

But, at the same time, Sunny was aware… sometimes painfully aware… that their relationship was not symmetrical.

How could it be, when he was someone Nephis thought she had only

met a few months ago?

Sure, she liked him… she was perhaps even infatuated with him. It wasn't like he was a random stranger to Nephis — not at all. He was her first and only lover, and the mere fact that she had discarded her solitude and chosen him above all the people in the world said a lot about how special he was in her eyes.

She did not have memories of him — but her heart seemed to remember.

That said, the harsh truth remained. Compared to the dire depths of what Sunny felt for Nephis, her own feelings… were relatively shallow.

So, she could have very well been comfortable with the current state of their relationship.

But he was not.

Even while drowning in bliss, even while having his most ardent desires fulfilled and his most daring expectations surpassed tenfold…

He still wanted more.

He wanted so much more.

Sunny was a greedy person, after all.

He wanted her to remember… but that was impossible.

So, he wanted her to at least want to know about him — everything there was to know, and more. He wanted her to ask questions, even if he could not answer.

That was why Sunny was pleasantly surprised to hear Nephis take the initiative to ask him about something meaningful.

Perhaps he was slowly growing on her… slowly, but surely.

He smiled.

"Well… sure, I'll tell you. If you must know, it was a True Name."

Nephis chuckled.

"Yeah, I figured. It was pretty obvious. But whose True Name is it?"

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then leaned back.

"I think I haven't told you this before, but I have a… a disciple."

He had to be careful about how he chose his words. Nephis had been aware of the connection between him and Rain in the past — so, if he wanted her to remember, he had to make sure to present it as a new relationship, one that was not connected to a person named Lost from Light.

That way, she would not forget.

Nephis seemed surprised.

"The Lord of Shadows has a disciple?"

Sunny shook his head.

"That guy? No… he's a bit of a loner. I mentioned before that one of my incarnations was in the Song Domain, right? He's the one doing the teaching."

Nephis seemed amused.

"I can never grow used to that Ability of yours. It is quite, quite something, you know?"

He laughed.

"Oh, don't I know it… in any case, that incarnation of mine has been with her for four years. My troublesome disciple finally Awakened right before the war — and, to my shock and disbelief, decided to join the Song Army. So, that is where she is right now. And therefore, my last incarnation as well."

Nephis tilted her head a little.

There was a lot to digest from his final statement, but she instantly discerned the most important piece of information.

"If your disciple just Awakened before the war and already has a True Name, then she must have received it in the First Nightmare. She must be… quite a special young woman, then. I received my True Name as a Sleeper, too. Like my mother before me."

There was a spark of interest in her eyes… actually, it had been there from the moment Sunny mentioned that he had a disciple. But after making the mistaken conclusion that Rain had received her True Name in the First Nightmare, Neph's interest grew.

Sunny lingered for a moment, then slowly shook his head.

"My disciple is indeed quite special. However, she did not receive her True Name in the First Nightmare… in fact, she never experienced a Nightmare. She is not a carrier of the Nightmare Spell."

Nephis froze.

She remained motionless for a few heartbeats, then slowly took a sip of her wine and carefully placed the glass on the table.

"She is not infected by the Spell? You… you taught her how to Awaken naturally?"

Sunny nodded.

"It took four years, an endless amount of research, and some special circumstances, but yes. That is what my incarnation in the Song Domain has done."

Nephis suddenly leaned forward, white sparks ignited in her eyes.

"Do you understand what that means?"

He sighed.

"To me… it means that she did not have to gamble her life in the Nightmare. But yes, I understand. Her achievement might shake the very foundation of our world, one day in the future."

Because it was a path to power for humanity to take that had nothing to do with the Nightmare Spell.

Because it offered choice, and maybe even freedom.

Nephis stared at him silently for a while, then leaned back with a stunned expression.

A few moments later, she smiled brightly and said in a playful tone:

"I could kiss you right now."

Sunny answered with a polite smile of his own.

"...Please do."

In the end, the important matters they had to get to ended up being postponed quite a bit, after all.

Chapter-2041: Spellsmith

Eventually, they entered the Brilliant Emporium. Aiko was away, running errands beyond the Ivory Island — while Sunny and Nephis had enjoyed some respite, she had been busy in these last few days.

The logistics of an Awakened army were unusual and complicated. Soldiers would inevitably earn Memories as the number of battles and skirmishes mounted, but not all of these Memories would suit them well. Therefore, an elaborate redistribution system was required.

Usually, a dedicated quartermaster would handle these matters within the unit and cooperate with other units to help Memories find suitable owners. The Fire Keepers were far fewer in number than the other legions of the Sword Army, but their kill count was disproportionately formidable — and, therefore, the number of Memories being purchased and sold by them was quite high, as well.

So, Sunny had to do some actual work as their nominal Memory Purveyor… or rather, he had to make Aiko do it for him.

Nephis had used her punishment to deliver an arsenal that the Fire Keepers had accumulated on the frontline to the main camp, so Aiko was currently very busy visiting all the other quartermasters to arrange trades.

He felt a little guilty about overworking his assistant, but on the other hand, she was surely having the time of her life. After all, the Brilliant Emporium was receiving a commission from each transaction, and they were earning quite a lot of soul shards these days.

'...War is indeed a profitable racket.'

Sunny did not know whether to feel happy or disgusted by how true

that statement was.

"Are you hungry?"

He himself had worked up quite an appetite since breakfast. Receiving a light nod, Sunny smiled and went about gathering a tray of snacks.

They took it to the workshop of the Brilliant Emporium, where a special crucible had been set up in recent months. Nephis used her Aspect to ignite the mystical wood gathered in the depths of the Hollows with her soul flame. Sunny watched the white flames dance for a while, then sighed and dismissed the Nebulous Mantle.

The shadows populating the basement instantly seemed to grow much deeper, darker, and colder.

He took off his shirt, as well, revealing his chiseled torso — his skin could easily withstand the sparks of the Transcendent fire, but his clothes could not. Plus, the heat of the crucible was simply too fierce…

Well, and Sunny secretly enjoyed the appreciative glances Nephis threw his way from time to time while he worked.

Currently, she was sitting on a workbench, enjoying the snacks and looking at him with a faint smile.

Sunny sighed and opened a small wooden box. There was a piece of strange ice inside, as well as samples of various precious metals. Another box contained a scattering of soul shards.

He manifested long tongs from shadows, and used them to place a specially crafted crucible above the soul flame. As Sunny poured a little bit of essence into it, a weave of runes ignited on its surface, dim and bleak in the radiance of the white flame.

His tongs survived just long enough to place the crucible in place.

Sunny looked into the flames, thinking about the task at hand. His mind became consumed by an endless tapestry of ethereal strings.

"...Tell me about your sorcery."

Distracted, he glanced at Nephis. She seemed to be enjoying herself, observing him with sparks dancing in her eyes.

Sunny smiled.

Saying things aloud was actually a good idea. Perhaps, that way, he would be able to come up with a new approach…

He pointed to the crucible.

"There are still a few problems I need to solve before attempting to forge you a worthy sword. Today, we will determine the perfect alloy to become its vessel. I have already experimented extensively with various metals and mystical materials, but soul flame adds an element of unpredictability into the processes. So, we'll be conducting the last experiment today."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, and then added in a lively voice:

"Weaving is different from most other kinds of sorcery. The Sorcery of Names has existed from before time itself — it is founded in the natural laws of existence. The Sorcery of Runes is built upon it, and therefore shares its source. But Weaving is artificial, and thus unnatural… it was created by a sole individual. Weaver, the Demon of Fate."

His expression turned contemplative.

"I am not sure if weaving itself is founded upon some nebulous laws of existence, or if that sneaky daemon tampered with existence to make it work. However, it does work — not through Names or Runes, but through special patterns of strings that serve as guides for the flow of essence. These strings do not exist on the material plane, so it takes special eyes to see them. It also takes special hands to touch them."

Nephis chuckled.

"I get it, I get it. You are special, Master Sunless. You have special

touch..."

Sunny coughed, then grinned.

"Very much so! That said, I am not unique. There were other weavers throughout history, especially among the priesthood of the Nightmare Spell… but in our era, I am the only one. Ironically enough, I think that the Spell itself is to blame. Unless one is fortunate enough to inherit an very unlikely combination of Attributes, it is almost impossible to gain sight that allows one to perceive spellweave, let alone the ability to touch it."

He shook his head.

"Within the limitations of one's Aspect, at least — and since the Spell provides a straightforward and convenient path to power, very few people ever feel the need to wander aimlessly in search of unconventional sources of it. Therefore, no one has stumbled upon the truth of weaving yet, except for me."

Sunny sighed.

"Of course, that was simply the first step. A caveman would not automatically become an engineer after witnessing a textbook on material science… similarly, I had to study long and hard to reach where I am today."

He remained silent for a bit, and then added neutrally:

"All for this moment."

After that, Sunny scratched the back of his head and added in a less serious tone:

"Well, not this exact moment! I mean… the entire forging process we are undertaking."

Nephis smiled.

"That is quite impressive."

Sunny nodded and picked up the piece of mystical ice.

However, Nephis wasn't done talking.

Leaning back a little, he sent a crimson raspberry into her mouth and said languidly:

"Ah, how hot…"

Sunny accidentally dropped the piece of ice.

Looking back, he saw Nephis fanning herself with a hand. She met his gaze and raised an eyebrow.

"What? The workshop, I mean. It's getting rather heated."

He lingered for a few moments, then bent down to pick up the piece of ice.

'I am definitely dragging her to the lake after this is done… and throwing her into the water, too...'

Chapter-2042: Cold Flame

Sunny concentrated on creating the alloy. There was little common sense to what he was doing now, since the qualities of the materials transcended the mundane. The foundation of the alloy was a piece of the mystical ice that had once been the heart of the Transcendent Titan, Winter Beast. The metals were no less storied, sourced from the treasury of the royal clan at great expense.

The flame had come from the soul of Changing Star… another Transcendent Titan. Of course, Sunny was not simply melting the materials by exposing them to the immolating heat of her fire — he had to use a crucible, which seemed to defeat the purpose.

So, he had created a special crucible first, one that was both capable of withstanding the destructive power of soul flame and able to channel it instead of simply transferring heat. The first attempt at casting the crucible was a Memory, but in the end, Sunny had to employ Cassie's help to create a special runic enchantment.

That was because there was an inherent problem with using soul flame while weaving…

Sunny sighed and explained as metals slowly melted in the incandescent crucible:

"We are using your soul flame for forging because, as far as I can tell, personal affinity between the Memory and its master plays a great role in binding the two together. That was what I observed when dealing with a soulbound relic left behind by the Demon of Destiny, at least… there was an arduous condition that one had to meet in order to bind it, which I assumed to be a test at first. But later, I started to suspect that it was as much of a necessity as a challenge, meant to foster mutual affinity."

In hindsight, it made sense that Nether had been the one to create

Soulbound Relics. These relics were able to grow and change with their owners, after all, almost like living beings. Considering how obsessed the prideful daemon had been with creating life, it was unlikely to be a coincidence.

The metals had already turned into incandescent liquid, but the mystical ice still remained, radiating an oppressive feeling of cold. Sunny continued:

"Therefore, a Memory forged in the fires of your soul would naturally have a high affinity to you. Sadly, there lies the problem… your flame is simply too tyrannical."

Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"How is that a problem?"

Sunny smiled.

Indeed. He had not expected to encounter this particular roadblock, either.

"Usually, I create the vessel first, and then enchant it. But this Memory is quite special, so forging and enchanting have to happen at the same time — that way, the weave will be integrated into the very essence of the sword. Your flames can burn anything, though, material or immaterial. They can even burn souls."

Nephis tilted her head a little.

"...And you create enchantments from strings of soul essence."

Sunny chuckled.

"Indeed. I need your flame to create the sword, but it will be destroying the essence strings as I weave them together. It's a bit of a conundrum."

Nephis remained silent for a moment.

"I bet you have come up with the solution already, though."

Sunny looked at her curiously, then nodded.

"True… took me a while, but I did. I tried all kinds of methods trying to isolate the essence strings and protect them from the flame, but actually, the answer was ridiculously simple."

She raised an eyebrow.

"What is it? I'll say… it's a bit disheartening to hear that there's a simple way to render my flames harmless."

Sunny laughed.

"Well, it's just the nature of the essence strings themselves, you see. Before today, I've been using my own essence to create them, naturally. But for this Memory, we will be using your essence instead. Since the flame and the strings will be of the same source, one won't destroy the other. Using your own essence to construct the spellweave will increase the affinity of the Memory further, as well."

Sunny used one of the Quintessence Pearls installed near the furnace to fan the flames. The heat grew almost unbearable, and beads of sweat glistened on his porcelain skin like pearls.

The mystical ice was starting to give in to the soul flame.

"We would have had to get inventive to extract your essence if you were an Awakened. But you are a Saint… your soul has already escaped the limitations of your body, and your essence flows free, permeating the world. So, that step should not be too troublesome as long as you cooperate."

Nephis studied him for a while and smiled.

"It's strange."

Sunny looked at her in confusion.

"What is?"

She simply smiled.

"Just how… nonchalant you are about this. Every step of the way seems to demand inventing something that has never been done before, and yet you keep coming up with these revolutionary and elaborate solutions, not even bothering to acknowledge them as something important."

He stared at her for a few moments.

"Well, that's just science, isn't it? People who built the Obel Scale were doing something that has nothing been done before, too. Or those who had developed the earliest concepts of spelltech. Today, there is a woman in Bastion who is trying to build a working electrical grid in the Dream Realm… I bet she's going to succeed, too. It seems daunting, but finding solutions is what we, humans, are best at. Especially when motivated by necessity."

Still… Sunny was secretly delighted by the compliment.

He watched the small piece of ice turn into a liquid. It was definitely not water, and Sunny had no idea what the liquid actually was… however, he knew that it always remained cold, never boiled, and never evaporated.

It was also not going to remain a liquid for long.

The incandescent metals mixed with the melted ice, and he swiftly poured the searing silver mass into a small mold. A few moments later, it had already solidified, turning into a bar of lustrous steel.

Well, it wasn't actual steel, of course. Rather, it was an alloy that had never been created before, and therefore had no name.

Sunny was pretty certain of its deadly qualities, though.

Picking up the silvery bar, he weighed it in his hand, then studied it carefully.

If not for his outstanding resilience to elemental damage, his hand would have probably already turned to ice and shattered. The alloy was cold… dreadfully cold.

Cold enough to make him shiver.

But more importantly, it possessed all the qualities that were needed to forge a sublime sword.

The last experiment was successful.

Sunny smiled.

"This… will cut."

A blade forged from this would be sharp enough to cut the world.

Chapter-2043: Master of Forgery

Now that the small bar of silver alloy was ready, Sunny summoned Weaver's Needle and manifested two additional pairs of hands.

He also manifested a second incarnation, this one raising a dark hammer.

"This next part… is a practice run. Just to see if I can actually enchant something that is being burned in your soul flame."

Nephis sighed.

Before, she had only used her Aspect to ignite the fire — it continued to burn on its own, so she did not need to use her powers to maintain it. Therefore, she did not have to endure the suffering of her Flaw.

"What do you need me to do?"

Sunny lingered for a while, then smiled.

"First, let's try something simple. Just send your essence outward and don't resist when I try to take control of it. Think of it like healing your followers at a distance, but without intent or target."

In reality, all Awakened knew how to control their soul essence well enough to just pour it aimlessly into the world. However, that way, it quickly dissipated — Sunny needed something more meaningful. Luckily, the way Transcendent souls interacted with the world was special, and far less limited by boundaries.

Nephis nodded softly and closed her eyes.

In the next moment, Sunny could feel her presence growing stronger. The radiance of the dancing flame was suddenly brighter, and the fire itself surged. The shadows gathered in the dark chamber turned stark

and sharp, with a gust of warm wind throwing his hair into disarray.

Shifting his gaze, Sunny could almost see rays of blinding light pouring from the seven radiant stars that burned within Neph's soul.

He took a deep breath.

'Now… can I actually manipulate her essence?'

As he focused on the beautiful light, a triangular serpentine head rose from the shadows beneath his feet. Serpent slivered up his leg and coiled around his body, turning into an extensive black tattoo.

Its [Shadow Guide] and [Spirit Guide] Attributes could very well prove helpful in this process.

Feeling a slight tingling in his fingers, Sunny reached toward the rays of radiant light and tried to grasp them.

It felt strange, trying to touch light.

And yet, unexpectedly, it worked.

Sunny was startled by how easy it was. Nephis seemed surprised, too, as if she felt something.

A moment later, her radiant essence easily escaped his control, as if rebelling against foreign touch.

His fingers tingled once more…

Was his ability to manipulate essence simply the consequence of possessing Bone Weave, or was Soul Weave involved, as well?

In any case, it seemed that Sunny could not control someone else's soul essence against the will of its master, even when it was dispersed freely outside their body.

Nephis froze for a moment, then shook her head.

"Sorry… I didn't mean to resist. It was just an instinct. I'll try to hold back this time."

Sunny nodded and reached toward the radiant light once more.

This time, the blinding rays did not escape his touch.

Guiding them cautiously, he began the familiar task of weaving essence into ethereal strings — only this time, the strings were not the familiar black, but instead bright and beautiful like pure starlight.

While his original body was busy creating essence strings, the avatar placed the alloy bar into the white flames.

Some time later, the alloy had heated up, starting to glow with an angry white glow. Not wasting any time, Sunny pulled it from the fire and placed it on the anvil.

A deafening thunderclap resounded when his hammer fell on the piece of incandescent metal. A powerful shockwave was released, and the Brilliant Emporium shook a little.

Behind him, Nephis leisurely raised her hands and pressed them against her ears.

'Focus…'

Sunny split his consciousness between two tasks.

One of his incarnations was hammering the bar of alloy into a suitable shape, while the other was starting to infuse it with the basis of a simple spellweave.

The metal was truly colder than a frozen hell. It cooled swiftly, forcing Sunny to plunge it into the furnace over and over again. Luckily, his guess had been right. The ethereal strings woven from Neph's own soul essence did not immediately burn to ash in the incandescent glow of her fire, withstanding it for now… his own shadow strings would have been destroyed in mere moments.

More than that, something strange was happening to the weave as it was washed by the soul flame. It was… changing, somehow. The patterns remained the same, but the feeling it gave Sunny was different — more profound, substantial, and integrated into the silver metal on a deeper level.

'Curious.'

That allowed Sunny to concentrate on the forging itself — not that there was a lot for him to do.

Usually, a smith would face a lot of challenges depending on their intent and the quality of the materials at their disposal. A sword like tachi, for example, involved a rather complicated forging process, with softer and harder metals needed to create varied rigidity between the edge and the spine.

A metal of low quality would need to be heated, folded, and hammered countless times to remove impurities and make the blade uniform along all of its length… and so on.

But Sunny was using an alloy that was beyond any mundane metal, and the design of the weapon he was forging was rather simple. So, he did not need to think about anything except precision.

And power.

The sublime alloy Sunny had created had to be resilient enough to endure being wielded by Nephis, so it was quite stubborn. Reshaping it with a hammer was no easy task. Sunny had to apply all of his fearsome Transcendent strength to each strike, which was a truly harrowing amount of force.

With each strike, a deafening thunderclap resounded, and powerful currents of wind were stirred. The Marvelous Mimic trembled and groaned, as if trying to complain.

As Sunny's hand rose and fell, lean muscles rolled under his glistening skin, making him seem like a statue chiseled from white marble. Incandescent sparks swarmed around his flawless figure, and white flames reflected in his onyx eyes. The scales of his black tattoo seem to glimmer like gemstones.

Nephis leaned back, enjoying the view.

However, after a while, there was a loud crack, and Sunny grew motionless.

His eyes narrowed, and his lips twisted into a grimace.

"Damnation."

Lowering the hammer, he looked at the debris laying at his feet, and sighed.

"...We're going to need a tougher anvil."

Chapter-2044: Faithful Companion

Eventually, they found themselves on the shore of the lake. The grey sky of Godgrave was shining far above, so the lake itself seemed grey, as well. However, at the same time, its waters shone resplendently, almost to the point that it was painful to look at it.

The water was still cool and refreshing, though — a fact that both Sunny and Nephis had already enjoyed.

Sunny in particular, who felt a bit drained after long hours of forging.

It had taken him many attempts to figure out how to work the silver alloy, in the end. Still, he managed to succeed.

Currently, Sunny was laying on a blanket, spinning a simple silver knife between his fingers. The knife did not possess any enchantments except for those that made it a Memory, but it had been forged in the flames of Neph's soul, and enchanted with her essence.

"May I?"

He looked at Nephis, appreciated the lavish view of her tantalizing body for a few moments too long, and offered her the knife with a smile.

'That swimsuit… is a crime.'

She took the knife and studied it with a curious expression.

Eventually, Nephis shook her head.

"It feels good in my hand. But I don't sense any special bond to it."

Sunny nodded.

"That is because soul flame and essence strings are only one of the necessary ingredients if one wishes to create a Soulbound Relic."

She studied him for a few moments.

"What are the rest of the ingredients?"

Sunny lingered with an answer, not wanting to admit that he wasn't completely sure.

He was confident enough that his theories were correct, but… they would only know after attempting the forging.

Eventually, he gave in to the pain of his Flaw and spoke:

"Well, first of all… I've decided to cheat a little. Instead of creating a new Memory, I want to reforge one that you already possess."

Nephis propped herself up on one elbow and looked at him from above, her beautiful silver hair falling down like a waterfall.

"Oh?"

Sunny nodded.

"In fact, it is the first Memory you have ever received. The Dream Blade."

The silver longsword that Nephis had received in her First Nightmare, and wielded while wandering the Forgotten Shore, the Nightmare Desert, the outskirts of the Underworld, and the depths of the Second Nightmare.

She seemed surprised.

"The Dream Blade? But… it is merely a Dormant weapon of the First Tier. Is it suitable to become the base for such a powerful relic?"

Sunny slowly shook his head.

"It doesn't matter what Rank or Tier it is. What matters the most is

the bond between it has with you. Correct me if I am wrong, but that sword was your companion throughout some of the most dreadful chapters of your life. And it served you well."

Nephis hesitated for a bit, then nodded.

"Indeed. No other sword has ever been able to compare."

Sunny hesitated for a bit, then added cautiously:

"There is another reason why I chose the Dream Blade, actually. That sword… it was a bit strange from the very beginning, wasn't it?"

She raised an eyebrow.

"How so?"

Sunny considered his words for a few moments.

"You should know. You only killed one Nightmare Creature in your First Nightmare, after all — the Awakened Terror that had trapped you in a dream. And yet, you brought back two Memories. An Awakened armor of the Sixth Tier, which you gave to Cassie on the Forgotten Shore, and the Dream Blade. A Dormant weapon of the First Tier. Where did the second Memory come from?"

Nephis hesitated.

"You… seem to know a whole lot about my First Nightmare. Curious. There are very few people I have ever told about it."

Sunny shrugged.

"Two people can only keep a secret if one of them is dead."

She studied him with an amused expression, then chuckled.

"I guess. In any case, I received the Dream Blade after escaping the dream. It was what I used to slay the Terror while it was wriggling in pain. I might not have survived otherwise… so, I simply assumed that the dream itself was like a living being, which I destroyed."

Sunny nodded.

"That is most likely the case. However, I can't help but think about a different possibility. A more symbolic one, perhaps. After all, you have destroyed that dream by burning yourself alive. So, one might think that you received that Memory for slaying… yourself. A Dormant Memory of the First Tier for the life of a Sleeper. Sounds strange, but it would not be the strangest thing the Spell has done by far."

As Nephis considered his words with a perplexed expression, Sunny sighed.

"No matter if there is any truth to that theory, though, the Dream Blade is still our best choice. Of course… if I fail, it will be destroyed. Therefore, we will only have one attempt to get it right."

She laid back down, remained silent for a few moments, and asked:

"When will we make this attempt, then?"

Sunny contemplated the answer.

He had already considered and tried almost everything he could think of.

For example, there was the bizarre idea of attempting to forge the sword within Neph's Soul Sea. Sadly, she seemed to be too powerful to be imprinted by the [Mark of Shadows], and Sunny had no way to enter someone else's Soul Sea otherwise.

He had also considered replacing the soul shards necessary for creating the Memory… with one of Neph's own soul cores. But while she could sacrifice her cores to receive astonishing power, there was no real way for them to simply carve out one of them — without destroying it, at least. Besides, the Mantle of the Underworld had not required its master to use their own soul as fuel.

Sunny had even examined each of the thousands of silent shadows resting in his soul, hoping that one would possess an ability that Serpent could use to help the forging. Alas, powerful Nightmare Creatures capable of manipulating souls were very rare, and Sunny

had been fortunate enough to not cross paths with many of them.

So, there was no point in postponing the inevitable anymore.

He sighed.

"The day after tomorrow. There won't be a better opportunity later."

Sunny turned his head, looked at Nephis, and smiled.

"In the meantime, though, I am going to need you to pull some strings on my behalf, princess. There is this one thing I still want to try…"

She turned her head, too.

For a few moments, they were laying side by side, their faces almost too close to each other. Sunny stared into her calm, grey eyes silently, feeling content and at peace.

Then, her eyes grew a little livelier.

She smiled with a hint of mirth.

"Oh? There is a thing you still want to try?"

Sunny closed his eyes and let out a tortured sigh.

'All this teasing!'

When he opened his eyes again, his gaze was quite heated.

But what could he do?

His Flaw compelled him to answer truthfully, so that was what he did…

Chapter-2045: Professional Exchange

Even on the last day before attempting to forge the soulbound sword, Sunny did not feel completely confident. Therefore, he decided to try a far-fetched gamble — if things went well, he could gain an unexpected spark of inspiration. But even if there was no result, it was still something that he had been curious about for a long time.

He wanted to observe the forgemasters of Clan Valor while they created Memories.

After all, depending on how things went in the near future, Clan Valor could very well cease to exist. It would be a real shame if he had never even glimpsed the secrets of their craft, considering that they were the closest thing he had to colleagues.

He knew a few things about the spellsmiths of Valor, of course.

For example, he knew that they were not weavers, but rather a group of individuals whose Aspects allowed them to create Memories — some coming from the Valor bloodline, some adopted into the Great Clan as valued retainers.

It made sense, really. It was known that family members often — although not always — shared Aspects of similar nature. That was especially true for the Great Clans, whose scions inherited the same lineage Attribute… in the case of Valor, it was the divine lineage of War God, who was also the deity of craft and progress.

Granted, not all members of the branch families of Valor had it. Nevertheless, there were enough people with Aspects that had to do with crafting among them that Valor had been the dominant force in that field ever since the Nightmare Spell descended.

Therefore, it was not surprising that they had put a lot of effort into systematically recruiting similar talents, both through patronage and marriage, aiming to achieve a functional monopoly on all things having to do with forging Memories.

Sunny also knew that while the enchanters of Valor were inferior to him in many regards, there were also areas where they were superior. For example, they knew far more about runic sorcery than he did. They were also able to create Echoes, which he had not quite mastered yet.

So, his hopes were high.

The problem, however, was that the royal clan — quite understandably — guarded its secrets close. Not just anyone could meet the forgemasters, let alone observe them as they worked.

So, Sunny needed Nephis to pull strings and get him an appointment.

Fortunately enough, the forgemasters had followed their King to Godgrave… which also made sense, considering that this was where their skills were needed the most. And since they were too precious to send to the frontline, most of them were right here, in the main camp of the Sword Army.

The useless title of the Knight of Valor Sunny had received was also of some help… after all, it meant that he was technically not an outsider. More than that, he was the Memory Purveyor of the Fire Keepers, and Fire Keepers were technically a part of the Valor forces.

It was just that his knightly title was a sham, while Nephis and her warriors were pariahs in the royal clan. The enmity the elders of Clan Valor felt for her was only subtle enough to not be blatant.

However, the Sword Domain was currently at war. Here in Godgrave, Neph's authority was at its peak, while the influence of the elders was severely diminished. So, it did not take her a lot of effort to arrange a visit to the forge.

In the morning, as they walked toward the Valor Keep, Sunny couldn't contain his curiosity and asked:

"Was it very hard to get me in?"

Nephis remained silent for a moment, then shook her head lightly.

"Not really."

Sunny was a little surprised. He would have imagined that there would be at least some resistance, which was why he had not attempted to approach the forgemasters before.

"Huh. How come?"

She lingered with the answer.

"Well… I guess we have a kind of ally among the enchanters. In a way."

That sounded a little mysterious, but Sunny decided to let it go.

Countless gazes were following them as they walked across the camp. Nephis received fervent and admiring glances, while Sunny… not so much. Still, it wasn't as bad as it had been before — after all, he was a known entity now. Plus, the name of the Brilliant Emporium had already spread among the members of the Sword Army thanks to Aiko.

And, even if Sunny wanted to stay modest — which he did not — he and Nephis were simply too striking of a pair. It was difficult to dislike beautiful people.

"Wait…"

There was a reverberating sound of a horn, and everyone froze in place. Sunny and Nephis froze, too. A few moments later, the world suddenly turned unbearably bright, with every reflective surface in sight shining like a miniature sun.

The veil of clouds was broken.

Sunny sighed inwardly.

'Another Cloudbreak…'

Luckily, this time, he had managed to turn his head and look at Nephis in time. So, now, he could at least enjoy the view. The last time, he had been stuck staring at a wall for several hours.

Mercifully, this Cloudbreak had turned out to be a short one. Less than an hour later, the blinding radiance dimmed, and the frozen camp came alive again. By now, people were so used to these events that no one seemed too disturbed... there were very few casualties, if any, too.

Sunny stretched, massaged his shoulders, and followed Nephis to the gates of the Valor Keep.

The last time he had visited it… was in Cassie's memories, to interrogate Master Orum. Luckily, today, they were heading for the different part of the stone castle.

Passing a wide courtyard, the approached a large building with smoke coming from its many chimneys. Sunny had expected to hear the ringing of hammers falling on steel, but it was strangely quiet. A moment later, he noticed runes carved into the stones near the doors and windows of the forge, recognizing them as a part of a sound-suppressing enchantment.

'...Understandable.'

To be fair, he himself had been considering creating a silencing Memory after forging the small knife yesterday. Even his Transcendent ears could not withstand the thunderous clamor of his hammering.

Well, and... a Memory like that had some other uses, as well.

Chasing the unnecessary thoughts out of his head, Sunny threw one last curious glance at the exterior of the forge and went inside.

Chapter-2046: Spellsmiths of Valor

The forge Sunny and Nephis had entered was not the only space that the enchanters of Clan Valor used in the warcamp of the Sword Army. If anything, it was the less important of them — but he did not mind.

There was a small courtyard behind the outer wall, with harvested remains of the Nightmare Creatures piled neatly on the ground. Most of them had already been cleaned and processed, but there was still a heavy smell of blood lingering in the air.

Sunny studied the piles of hides, scales, bones, fangs, claws, tendons, and talons for a moment.

'Makes sense.'

Somehow, he had imagined this place to be full of metal and steel. But during the conquest of an untamed region of the Dream Realm, the main materials Awakened artisans would use were the corpses of the Nightmare Creatures — after all, they were readily available as a byproduct of the conquest itself, and often possessed amazing qualities as well.

Behind the material storage were the entrances to several crafting halls. Nephis led him to the central door, smiling softly in response to the reverent bows from the workers present in the courtyard.

"We are going to be visiting a pair of enchanters today. They are not the most senior, but also not without status… both are Masters, so you might want to treat them with some respect."

Sunny nodded.

Nephis knocked on the door, waited for a few moments, and then entered.

He could hear two voices coming from the inside:

"...Huh? What is it now?"

The first voice was female, hiding a hint of irritation.

"Oh, right. I forgot to mention. We have visitors today."

The second voice was male and quite nonchalant.

Sunny studied the two enchanters, a bit surprised. In his head, the forgemasters were all wizened, grey-haired old men. But these two look no different from most Masters he had met.

The first enchanter was a beautiful, petite woman wearing an emerald robe, with her hair gathered neatly into a bun.

The second enchanter was a seemingly absentminded man with messy black hair, dressed in peculiar patchwork garments. He wore plenty of accessories, too — both the clothes and the accessories seemed to be enchanted and self-made, making Sunny wonder what function each element was meant to play.

Nephis nodded.

"Master Snow. Master Alice."

The men responded with a nonchalant bow, while the woman suddenly froze.

Her eyes widened slightly.

A moment later, she seemed to regain her composure and bowed elegantly.

"Lady Changing Star, Master Sunless. It's an honor."

Despite her refined manners, Sunny couldn't help but feel like the gazes she threw at them were a little… heated.

'Is this the ally Neph mentioned, perhaps?'

He wasn't sure, but there was something familiar about these glances.

They were strangely similar to how mundane people usually looked at Kai, back in NQSC…

Sunny coughed.

"Pleasure to meet you."

The petite woman did not respond immediately.

Master Snow, meanwhile, studied him for a moment.

"So, is it true?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What is?"

The man scratched the back of his head.

"That you are an enchanter."

'Ah.'

Initially, Sunny had wanted to hide the fact that he could create Memories — and it was still hidden, somewhat. However, once he started modifying Memories from the Fire Keepers and sending Aiko out to gather samples for him to study, it was hard not to reveal the fact that he could at least change their enchantments.

He nodded.

"I am indeed somewhat capable of enchanting. Look — I made it myself."

With that, he threw the silver knife to the forgemaster.

Master Snow caught it with a motion that betrayed more than a modest amount of battle experience, studied it for a few moments, then grimaced.

"Well… at least you are a decent blacksmith."

Forging the silver knife was an arduous process, but it only possessed the rudimentary enchantments shared by all Memories. By presenting it to the experienced spellsmith, Sunny painted himself as someone barely passing as an enchanter.

His little deception seemed to work quite well.

Master Alice gave her male colleague a scathing look.

"Don't say that! Yes, this thing can barely be called a Memory… and yes, I would have died of embarrassment if I showed it to anyone... but Master Sunless has many redeeming qualities!"

With that, she glanced at Nephis and smiled.

"Am I right, Lady Changing Star?"

Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"Well, yes. He is outstanding in many regards."

'That's right!'

Sunny struggled to maintain a polite smile on his lips.

Master Snow stared at him skeptically for a few moments, then sighed.

"Well, no matter. You are just here to observe, correct? We are not doing anything revolutionary today, but it still requires absolute focus. So… make yourself at home. But not too at home. Just… moderately at home, I guess."

The other enchanter nodded.

"Yes, yes… Lady Nephis, you can stand over there. The lighting there is the best… I mean, the view from there is the best. Oh, and Master Sunless, you stand next to her. Gods, they are so… I mean, I hope you are comfortable! We'll continue working, then."

As Sunny and Nephis moved to the wall opposite the entrance, the two enchanters continued what they had been doing while trying not to pay them too much attention.

Sunny was curious to see the process of enchantment, but for now, both were simply preparing the materials. From what he could tell, Master Snow was in the process of crafting a suit of scale armor. Master Alice, meanwhile, was carving something out of bone. It looked like... the hull of a toy ship? No, it had to be an elaborate arrowhead.

He lingered for a few moments, then asked:

"Are you both members of Clan Valor?"

The petite woman looked at him with surprise.

"Goodness, no. Well, he is — from a minor branch family. But I am a retainer… actually, I used to work for the government before the Chain of Nightmares. Later, I ended up in Bastion, and two Nightmares later, here I am."

The man, meanwhile, was fully consumed by his work. Sunny was not sure if the enchanter had even heard the question. He seemed like the kind of guy who would even forget to eat when obsessing over an interesting challenge.

So, Sunny looked back to Master Alice.

"Two Nightmares in four years… you must be quite impressive."

It used to be that people spent no less than a decade preparing to challenge the Second Nightmare. This timeline had shortened somewhat in recent years, but not to that degree.

The petite woman looked at him with a mortified expression.

"M—master Sunless… what are you... Lady Nephis is right here!"

He blinked, not catching her meaning.

Nephis seemed similarly confused.

'What? What did I say?'

Sunny forced out a polite smile.

"Please forgive me. Then, if you don't mind me asking… how, exactly, do the enchanters of Clan Valor create Memories?"

Chapter-2047: Infusers and Forgers

Alice gave him a curious glance, then continued to carve arrowheads with a small smile. The enchanted knife she was holding moved nimbly, slicing the bones of Corrupted abominations like butter.

"There is no single method we use to enchant items — all Aspects are unique, after all. However, over the decades, a sort of unified classification was developed to make sense of it all. Well… or so I've been told. I only joined Valor a few years ago."

She glanced at Master Snow, as if expecting him to pitch in, but then sighed and continued herself:

"Warriors of Valor are not the only ones who get to have fancy titles, you know? Sir Sunless. Just like you guys are called Squires, Knights, and Paladins, we enchanters have a hierarchy consisting of three ranks, as well. Granted, ours have nothing to do with the actual Soul Rank of a person, but are instead based on the nature of one's Aspect."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"I am already a Knight of Valor, though. If I were to receive an enchanter title from the royal clan, what would people call me?"

Master Alice suddenly let out a laugh, then covered her mouth with a hand and glanced at Sunny with wide eyes.

A few moments later, she forced out an apologetic smile.

"Ah yes… of course! You are a brave and valiant Knight, Sir Sunless. No doubt about it. Still — enchanters are much rarer than warriors. So, we are held in high regard. There are many of us who feel at

home on a battlefield, actually, but our duty in the forge is more important. Therefore, the titles we receive in the forge technically take precedence. We don't use them much, though."

Sunny smiled and turned his head to look at Nephis.

"Did you hear? Enchanters seem to be more valuable than warriors."

She glanced at him evenly, then asked in a neutral tone:

"What about healers, Master Alice?"

The petite woman raised an eyebrow.

"Oh… well, healers are the most precious, of course! A talented enchanter might be worth their own weight in gold, but a powerful healer is simply priceless."

Nephis continued to stare at Sunny with an aloof expression.

The corner of her lips, however, curled upward ever-so-slightly, betraying a hint of smugness.

'...Cute.'

Master Alice, meanwhile, continued:

"In any case, our version of the Squire, the Knight, and the Paladin is the Infuser, the Forger, and the Spellsmith. I mentioned these titles from the least prestigious to the most venerated — however, they are not mutually exclusive. A person can be both an Infuser and a Forger, for example. Oh, there are also Scribes — those who have mastered the Runes. That guy over there…"

She pointed her carving knife at Master Snow:

"...is technically a Scribe Knight, as well as a Spellsmith. I, on the other hand, am both an Infuser and a Forger — but since all these titles are a bit convoluted, we are simply called Forgemaster Snow and Forgemaster Alice. Now, you might have already guessed the meaning of these titles, but let me explain."

Sunny was listening to the petite woman intently. This was not exactly vital information, but he was still quite interested to learn about the inner workings of the storied Clan Valor. There was no other group quite like it anywhere out there, after all, and no force as fearsome among the human factions.

It was fascinating that the true strength of Valor lay not in their martial prowess, but in their technology and craft.

Master Alice continued to carve an arrowhead out of Transcendent bone as she explained:

"Infusers make up the bulk of the enchanters of Valor. Most of them are retainers like me, too… our power comes in many forms, but at its core lies the ability to permanently enhance and augment inanimate objects. Make weapons sharper, armor more durable, walls less likely to crumble. Or, alternatively, infuse inanimate objects with special qualities — for example, infuse an arrowhead with the quality of exploding on impact."

She waved the half-carved arrowhead in the air and smiled.

Sunny nodded.

He understood the concept… Samara of his Evacuation Army cohort had been somewhat of an Infuser, in a sense — that was why her bullets could slay powerful Nightmare Creatures. Only, in her case, the infusion of charged essence had not been permanent, lasting only a few days.

He sighed.

Maybe that would have changed if Samara had been given a chance to become a Master.

"That does not make these enhanced items into Memories, though."

Master Alice nodded.

"I'm getting to it! Right… the work we Infusers do might not seem as impressive as that of Forgers and Spellsmiths, but it is still very important. Not the least of all because infused items often endure the

Runes better, and can therefore be augmented even further by the Scribes."

That also made complete sense to Sunny. He already knew that different materials possessed different arcane capacity — some could withstand immense spellweaves crafted from powerful soul shards and potent essence, some were so mundane that they would disintegrate under the strain of the simplest enchantment.

"So what do the Forgers do?"

The petite woman looked at him with a smile.

"Just what the name suggests, of course! We are masters of forgery."

Finishing carving the arrowhead, she raised it in one palm, and took an uncut fragment of bone with another hand. Sunny sensed a subtle flow of soul essence, and then both of the woman's hands ignited with a soft emerald glow.

Bathed in that glow, the rough fragment of bone slowly melted and changed shape, turning into a perfect copy of the carved arrowhead.

Master Alice compared the two with a discerning eye, nodded in satisfaction, and picked up another arrowhead — this one forged from lustrous metal and engraved with a beautiful filigree of runes.

"Forgers possess Abilities that allow them to copy or replicate items — either in their entirety or only certain traits. Some can duplicate weapons, for example, some can copy a quality of one weapon to another. There are far fewer Forgers than there are Infusers, and many of them come from the minor branches of the Valor family."

She lingered for a moment, and then added:

"That said, Forgers are not at all as powerful and precious as Spellsmiths… and yet, they are perhaps the most important cog in this miraculous machine. Do you understand why?"

Nephis tilted her head in confusion, but Sunny's eyes suddenly glistened.

"Members of the Valor family can transfer a quality of one item to another?"

The petite woman nodded and let out a chuckle.

"Indeed. So, if a suitable Forger takes a Memory weapon and transfers the quality of [being a Memory] to an ordinary weapon that had been prepared by an Infuser and a Scribe… guess what happens?"

Chapter-2048: Different Foundations

Sunny took a deep breath, then exhaled slowly.

"It will become a Memory?"

Master Alice nodded.

"Yes! In fact, that is how most Memories produced by the forgemasters of Valor are made. A mundane weapon is forged, augmented by an Infuser, enchanted by a Scribe, and then turned into a Memory by a Forger. Of course, there are a million variations of the process, with different enchanters possessing different powers and strengths. But the basics are the same. And even if some Forgers can't copy the [Memory] quality, those who can pick up the slack."

She paused for a moment, then added with a sigh:

"There are more elaborate methods of Forgery, as well. Some of us can simply duplicate Memories, some can transfer particular enchantments — and so on. The more powerful of the forged Memories are the result of carefully collecting suitable enchantments and transferring them to a single vessel, almost like assembling a perfect weapon from building blocks. Well, I won't bore you with details… suffice it to say that there is space for artistry in this process, too."

With that, Alice activated her Aspect once more. As Sunny watched, bewildered, the steel arrowhead in her right hand was suddenly enveloped by emerald light. Some time later, weak wisps of similar light started to shine from beneath the surface of the bone arrowhead, which she was holding in her left hand, as well.

Soon, the similar filigree of runes started to reveal itself on the ivory

surface of the bone, as if burned into it from within by the emerald light.

Shifting his vision, Sunny peered beneath the surface of the bone arrowhead and held his breath.

Something miraculous was happening there, right in front of his eyes.

A storm of soul essence poured into the black abyss contained within the small piece of bone, drowning it in soft radiance. The cloud of essence drifted in the darkness, shining like a vast nebula… but then, its contours changed, becoming sharper and more defined.

Then, empty spaces revealed themselves between the wisps of shining gas, slowly growing as the strands of essence were compressed tighter and tighter. Turning into strings.

A spellweave was being born.

Sunny suppressed a sincere desire to applaud and simply put on an admiring smile.

"This is… amazing."

Master Alice sighed.

"Is it? Well… I guess so. The first few times — maybe a few dozen times — I was amazed, as well. However, there is certainly room for improvement. For example, it is usually too difficult for me to replicate Transcendent enchantments. I also spend too much essence on each attempt — this one is my first for the day, but starting from around the third, I'll have to substitute my own essence with soul shards. It costs quite a penny."

Sunny shook his head.

"Still."

Internally, he was thinking about something else.

So far… what both Infusers and Forgers did sounded a lot like the early stages of his own journey as a sorcerer, only built on a different

foundation.

The foundation Sunny had used was observation, study, and understanding. By examining countless weaves, he slowly learned to separate particular patterns of ethereal strings from the radiant tapestries. Then, he deciphered the meaning of some patterns, and learned how to replicate them.

For the longest time, his entire repertoire was nothing but replication. Just like the petite enchantress had said, it was very much like assembling a Memory from building blocks — only, in his case, Sunny had to prepare the blocks himself. Later, he attained some liberty in how to implement them, thus gaining the ability to attune the copied enchantments according to his needs.

The foundation the forgemasters of Valor used, though, was based on power and happenstance. There was a lot of skill and shrewd calculation involved in how they created Memories, sure, but they ultimately relied on the unique nature of their Aspects instead of understanding.

Funnily enough, at that stage, the result was the same. A Memory Sunny could create a few years ago would have hardly been superior to a Memory created in the forges of Clan Valor.

The difference, though, was that the path these enchanters followed was static, while his was not. Since the forgemasters relied on their Aspects to forge Memories, they were doomed to be forever limited by the boundaries of their Aspects.

But Sunny could develop and learn. His only limit was his enlightenment and comprehension. So, even though he had been no different from a Forger in the past, he was infinitely more capable than any of them could ever be now.

He had already delved into the very essence of weaving, gleaned its secrets, and grown capable of creating unique enchantments instead of copying the ones provided by the Spell — therefore, he did not need to follow someone else's blueprint, or be limited in what he could build by the shape of available blocks.

If he was correct, then his current level was akin to the most revered rank among the forgemasters — the Spellsmith… or maybe even already beyond that.

If not, then it was going to be soon.

Sunny smiled politely.

"What about the Spellsmiths, then?"

Master Alice glanced at her partner, then shrugged.

"Those are very few. All of them are members of the Valor family, and most are direct descendants — the children and grandchildren of the Warden. This guy here is a rare exception, since he is at best a very distant cousin to Princess Morgan… oh, and to you too, Princess Nephis!"

She beamed at Nephis, then sighed wistfully.

"Spellsmiths… can imbue armaments with mystical traits and enchantments directly, without having to copy them from somewhere else. I'm not really sure how it works, but their Aspects are all rather unique. They also possess a wealth of knowledge, the best equipment, and receive the most resources. Well, no wonder — after all, the senior and most distinguished Spellsmith of the royal clan is the King himself. His craft… it's on a different level, entirely. Almost miraculous."

The petite woman glanced at Master Snow and added in a slightly embarrassed tone:

"This guy can explain better. He'll be done with the current task in a bit, and then, you'll be able to see a demonstration."

Sunny nodded. He had surmised that Master Snow was the kind of artisan who got completely absorbed by his work — so, it wasn't wise to try to distract him now. If anything, he was surprised that Master Alice was so accommodating.

There… she was staring at them again, wasn't she?

His smile almost faltered.

"I have a couple more questions, if you don't mind."

The petite woman shook her head energetically and picked up a second bone arrowhead.

"Oh, of course! By all means. Anything you want, Master Sunless... I mean... no, n—not anything! I didn't mean it that way..."

Sunny stared at her for a moment while considering his words.

"Forgemasters can also create Echoes, can't they? I've seen a few."

Master Alice nodded with relief.

"Y—yes — in theory. And we do, sometimes. Forgers can create very crude automatons, while Spellsmiths can create true artificial Echoes. The process is not much different from forging Memories, just… way more time-consuming. It can take a senior Spellsmith an entire year or more to craft a single Echo. By comparison, dozens of Memories can be crafted in the same span of time. So, artificial Echoes are quite rare. They are mostly forged out of curiosity, for research, or to test yourself."

Sunny nodded. It made sense, somewhat. Echoes were never equal to the original, so arming Awakened elites well was a more efficient way of spending resources.

And then, finally, the last question… not the most important of them, but one of great interest to Sunny personally.

"And… the names. Who comes up with the names for the forged Memories? And the descriptions?"

Master Alice seemed a little surprised by the question.

"Uh… excuse me?"

Sunny leaned forward.

"Well, you know. This bone arrowhead you made into a Memory. Did

you give it a name? Something like, I don't know… [Bonehead]? [Bone and Arrow]?"

The petite woman gave him a strange look, then shook her head.

"Oh, no… the Spell names them for me. Some of the Spellsmiths have the ability to name and describe their creations personally, but most don't."

She lingered for a moment, then added politely:

"If you are curious, Master Sunless, I can check…"

The petite woman turned her head and stared into the air, clearly studying the runes.

"Huh. That's strange…"

For a moment, Master Alice had an incredulous expression on her face. Then, she shook her head with a hint of bafflement.

"The Spell seemed to have named it… [All Aboard]? What does it even mean? How... embarrassing..."

Chapter-2049: Things to Do in the Apocalypse

Master Alice concentrated on creating more enchanted arrowheads. As she explained, they would be attached to shafts and fitted with fletching later — and most likely by a different forgemaster.

After the second one, the petite woman dove into a lockbox containing the crafting hall's daily allocation of soul shards and used them to bolster her Aspect. Every once in a while, the shimmering crystal she was holding in her hand would crack and crumble into dust.

Sunny studied the process with a thoughtful expression.

No wonder custom Memories were a luxury reserved for the private troops of the royal clan. The work of the enchanters was chillingly expensive — especially considering that each of the spent soul shards could have been used to strengthen the core of an Awakened soldier.

In Antarctica, the continent had been flooded with great hordes of relatively weak abominations. That was why soldiers of the Evacuation had many opportunities to saturate their cores — but here in Godgrave, all Nightmare Creatures were stronger and more ferocious than the warriors of the two human armies.

Killing them was a tough task, and therefore, the soul shards were scarce. There were also many more Awakened here than there had been in Antarctica, so most soldiers still had plenty of room to grow.

That just went to show how exclusive the services of someone like Sunny were. Aiko was right… the Brilliant Emporium had to be presented as a luxury service. Very few people could afford bespoke Memories, especially considering that the royal clan was the main source of them by far.

Usually, Sunny would have felt bliss at the confirmation of his bright financial future, but today, his thoughts wandered in a different direction.

The situation in Godgrave — overwhelming enemies that were dreadfully difficult to defeat even for powerful Awakened, scarcity of resources, and a constant attrition of human lives — seemed to resemble what awaited humanity in the future very much.

Once more pieces of the waking world were swallowed by the Dream Realm, the civilization as he knew it would slowly start to collapse… transform, at best. The Dream Gate exodus would accelerate, with most of the population slowly migrating to the other side — at least if Nephis had anything to say about it.

If it was left to the Sovereigns to decide… who knew. Sunny could easily see a situation where the ruthlessly pragmatic Supremes simply shut the Dream Gates, leaving billions of people to die. Because the human enclaves they had been preparing in the Dream Realm for decades could only sustain hundreds of millions of inhabitants, not billions.

But even if the Sovereigns were defeated and Nephis usurped the throne of war, the future still looked dire.

There were more Death Zones in the Dream Realm, after all… and nothing really held the dreadful creatures populating them from migrating to greener pastures. Especially once those pastures were populated by countless humans, and started to emanate the alluring scent of myriads of human souls.

In fact, Sunny expected that to happen. A slow, inevitable, and terrifying escalation that would bring humanity to the brink of destruction. Not only because he had a habit of expecting the worst from the world, but also because there were relevant examples.

There had been five other Divine Realms swallowed by the Dream Realm before his world, after all. There were Supremes among the inhabitants of those worlds, too. And yet…

If it was so easy to survive in the Dream Realm, those civilizations

would have still been around. But something had wiped them out, leaving no survivors… in fact, Godgrave itself seemed to be the place where one of these civilizations had been destroyed.

What was a Cursed Tyrant doing in the ruins of a human city?

A chilling thought suddenly entered Sunny's mind.

There were no Cursed Ones in Bastion.

But there was at least one in North America…

So what was going to happen when America was consumed by the Dream Realm?

Would it appear north of the Forgotten Shore and the Burned Forest, like the fragment of Antarctica he had stumbled on?

Or would it appear somewhere else?

In the middle of the Stormsea, perhaps, or in the wilderness east of Bastion? Maybe even next to Bastion, moving other lands away?

Once it did, where would the Nightmare Creatures populating it go? Would they stay in place or disperse?

'Damn it…'

Before, Sunny had only been thinking about the approaching collapse of the waking world in terms of a human mass migration...

But there would probably be a mass migration of abominations, too.

After all, by the end of it all, there would be more Nightmare Creatures left in the waking world than humans. And they would be much more dreadful than they were now.

He sighed and briefly glanced at Nephis.

'We do indeed have to become Supreme…'

For now. But even that was most likely not enough to face the future.

Sunny would probably be able to slay a Cursed Tyrant like Condemnation after attaining Supremacy and establishing a vast Domain… somehow. But an Unholy Tyrant? An Unholy Titan?

Those were gods. Vile and corrupted, but still gods. And not only that, but gods of the highest caliber.

A mortal, no matter how powerful, could not defeat a god.

Sunny sighed again.

'Great.'

So, if he described it briefly…

These things were on his to-do list: forge a soulbound sword for Nephis, rebel against two Supremes and kill them, conquer the world, find and deal with the third Supreme, oversee the resettlement of the human race to the Dream Realm, become a god, and kill every god of the less handsome variety aiming to swallow humanity.

Oh, and also keep the flames of romance and passion alive in the process… with a workaholic girl who could not really remember him.

And keep his sister alive.

Preferably, make comically large sums of money while he was at it.

Sunny lingered for a moment, then lowered his head and rubbed his face.

'Ah…'

How come life had been so much simpler before?

He felt almost nostalgic about trying to survive in the outskirts.

Almost.

But not quite…

Nightmares, however, did feel strangely cozy and inviting at the moment.

Chapter-2050: Catalyst of Improvement

Luckily, Sunny had no time to stress about the glaringly eschatological nature of his daily life… or about romantic date ideas during the literal end of the world.

Soon enough, Master Snow — the Scribe Knight and Spellsmith — finished working on the cuirass of a robust scale armor and lowered his hands with a satisfied sigh.

The craftsmanship of the armor piece was exquisite. It was not an easy task, to work with the scales of a powerful abomination, but the man handled it beautifully. It was even of a higher quality than it needed to be — after all, the cuirass was meant to become a part of a Memory, and Memories tended to fit the body of their masters magically.

Perhaps Master Snow was a perfectionist — a quality that Sunny grew to dislike as he matured.

The man looked over to his partner and cleared his throat.

"It's ready to be Infused."

Alice temporarily put down the arrowheads and concentrated on the suit of armor, pouring a subtle, but constant stream of essence into it. It seemed that the Aspect Ability that made her an Infuser was her Dormant one — therefore, she could perform the Infusion even while low on essence.

With that, Master Snow hesitated for a few moments before turning to Sunny and Nephis.

"...You are still here?"

It was quite a rude question, considering that Nephis was his superior both in the military hierarchy and in that of the royal clan.

She smiled lazily.

"You know, Master Alice reminded me that we are distant cousins. Still… I think I can get you executed for insubordination if I really try. Or worse, get you permanently assigned to the Luminous Memories crafting hall."

Master Snow paled.

"L—luminous… what? You wouldn't dare!"

But then, he frowned.

"Wait, why are we even quarreling? It was an honest question."

Sunny sighed.

He suddenly sensed something very disturbing…

The feeling of starting to understand how Aiko felt when dealing with him.

"Yes, we are still here. We had a very illuminating conversation with Master Alice, and were waiting for you in hopes of witnessing a genuine Spellsmith creating a Memory."

Master Snow looked at him in surprise.

"Ah! I see. Well… I guess it would be an honor for someone like you to see a real Spellsmith at work. No problem."

Sunny's polite smile remained in place, but his eye twitched.

'...It's my own fault.'

He should have shown them something like [Definitely Not Me] or [In Case of Emergency] instead of a rudimentary Memory knife… of course, that would have caused its own swarm of problems.

There was some time left while Master Alice was Infusing the cuirass,

so Sunny asked with sufficient reverence in his voice:

"I can conceive how Forgers make mundane items into Memories. But you, Spellsmiths… honestly, I don't understand at all. Do people from the Valor bloodline simply possess Aspects that allow them to wish enchantments into existence?"

Master Snow gave him a dubious look.

"You should understand what a Memory is well enough, as well as where it comes from. So, no… it is not as simple as wishing them into existence. We do often unseal Aspects that have to do with craftsmanship and invention, though… and mirrors — hence the various abilities tied to replication that Forgers possess. However, Spellsmiths are an entirely different breed. We do not copy. We… improve."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Improve?"

The man nodded.

"That sounds a bit like the job of an Infuser, huh? But no, what I mean is something else. Let's say that there is a sword, and a Spellsmith turns it into a powerful Memory weapon. From the side, it seems like the Spellsmith is placing enchantments on the sword — but in truth, he does not. Instead, he encourages the sword to improve. To become sharper, stronger, more lethal… to become closer to the flawless version of what it is meant to be. The sword itself is the source of enchantments. The Spellsmith simply serves as the catalyst of change, as well as its guide."

Sunny hesitated for a few moments.

"So the sword turns into a Memory… because it has always possessed the capacity to be one?"

It was a strange thought, but somewhat in line with Valor's lineage of War God.

War God was also the deity of craft, intellect, and progress after all.

And life.

And life was a constant struggle.

So, Sunny could see a member of the Valor family being able to initiate the process of artificial evolution in something — the process of progress through iteration and struggle, just like natural selection was for living beings.

Of course, it was strange to consider that a chunk of sharpened metal could evolve.

Master Snow nodded.

"Just as a human possesses the capacity to be a god — the act which is revealed when one's Aspect is unsealed. You must have felt it as well, Master Sunless, on the day you conquered the First Nightmare… the fact that the source of power reshaping your soul and body was, and always had been, hidden within you. Not placed there by an outward force."

Sunny tilted his head, failing for the first time to maintain his polite facade. He was just too bewildered and engrossed by this strange… philosophy? School of thought? Nonsense?

In any case, he did remember feeling exactly what Master Snow had described. When the Spell helped him unseal the Shadow Slave Aspect, Sunny clearly felt that the source of the heat reforging him had come from somewhere within, from something that had been a part of him all along.

Even the word the Spell used hinted at fact.

[The First Seal is broken.]

[Awakening Dormant powers…]

Breaking a seal meant that the seal had existed somewhere inside him all along.

Awakening Dormant powers meant that they had been sleeping within him already.

Not that the Spell had placed the seal and the power into his soul as some form of reward… no, it had simply helped him access something that had already been there.

Sunny frowned.

'Actually… that makes a lot of sense.'

It was perfectly in line with what Ananke told them in the depths of the Tomb of Ariel about where humans had come from, and why they were so different from all other beasts and creatures.

It was because humans, just like the gods, had been born from the primordial flame of divinity… from the flame of desire. Their souls were formed from the sparks that had been cast when the Void was sealed in a net made from desire.

So, human souls came from the original source of divinity. Therefore, they could very well contain the potential for… everything.

An infinite amount of potentials — of all the Aspects that had existed, existed, and would ever exist. It was only when an Aspect was unsealed that the potential was realized, and therefore exhausted, turning infinite possibility into definite reality.

That was why Aspects came from within humans, and yet could very well have nothing to do with humans. Like Nephis, who had inherited an Aspect of a nephilim — or Sunny himself, who had inherited the Aspect of a divine shadow.

'Huh.'

Sunny narrowed his eyes a little.

'If I am the sword in this metaphor... then who is helping me improve?'

It was certainly not a Spellsmith.

Instead... it was the Nightmare Spell.

Chapter-2051: Guiding Hand

As far as Sunny could tell, the Spellsmiths of Valor believed that things were similar to humans — already containing an infinite amount of potentials that simply waited to be realized.

In the case of modern humans, the catalyst of this change was the Nightmare Spell.

In the case of inanimate objects… it was the Spellsmith.

Such an explanation was somewhat logical. However, Sunny was not buying one detail — the fact that becoming a Memory was closer to a flawless form for an object than its original nature.

That sounded too far-fetched. Sure, a Memory was a very convenient form for a weapon to take, but it was not exactly better or more true to what a weapon was supposed to be. Just different.

That also pointed to a broader problem with Master Snow's explanation. There were countless paths for any given thing to improve, so the potential change initiated by the Spellsmith would almost have to be random. And randomness was the enemy of design… a smith who could not control the result of their work to at least some degree was not worth being called one.

It went against what Sunny had observed the forgemasters could accomplish, as well. Morgan's Warbow had not seemed like a product of random growth, but rather like a masterpiece of human genius.

So, there had to be some kind of guidance involved.

Humans did not unseal Aspects randomly, either. There was cause and effect to what powers they received — their talent, their will, their circumstances, their accomplishments in conquering the First Nightmare. A person and their Aspect fit together like two pieces of

the same puzzle, and the puzzle was complete with the third piece… their Flaw.

As if fated for each other.

So, if Sunny had to say who or what guided Awakened through the sea of endless possibilities, he would have to say that there were two forces involved. One was their fate, and the other one was the Nightmare Spell.

Was the Spell manipulating fate, or simply going with its flow? He did not know.

Sunny lingered for a few moments.

"You said that Spellsmiths serve as guides of that improvement, as well?"

Master Snow nodded.

"Yes. It is hard to explain with words, actually… well, anyone would have trouble explaining how their Aspect functions, exactly, wouldn't they? Plus, while our Aspects often share similar traits, they are all different, in the end. Imagine it as… sensing imperfections within a weapon, as well as the countless paths it has to grow. Once you give power to the weapon's desire to improve, it undertakes to change itself blindly — however, it can't get far by trying to rush in all directions at the same time. The Spellsmith has to guide it to a certain path and keep it from wandering off the path, so that the change becomes profound."

So, countless existing possibilities were discarded in favor of a narrow, but far-reaching avenue of growth — with a Spellsmith like Master Snow deciding which direction was the most promising.

He grimaced.

"It sounds like a simple thing to do, but I assure you, it's anything but. Even though the source of change is the weapon itself, the Spellsmith has to possess a strong will and a clear focus to achieve a good result. More importantly, the Spellsmith has to possess a wealth of knowledge and understanding on all things, starting from the

material composition of metals, both mundane and mystical, to far more obscure disciplines. After all, how well you understand the possible paths to improvement and how many of the endless number of them you can discern depends on your ability to recognize their existence."

Master Snow smiled.

"It's both an art and a science… but more art than science, in the end. So, one's work has to be inspired."

Sunny considered his words for a bit.

Now, things made more sense.

It was not that the weapon itself chose to become a Memory because a Memory was the more flawless form for it. It was the Spellsmith who chose the form of a Memory, because they believed it to be superior — an unsurprising view, considering how dependent all Awakened were on their Memories, and all humanity was on the Nightmare Spell.

Sunny smiled.

"I'm looking forward to seeing your demonstration."

Master Snow shrugged absentmindedly.

"Sure. Just… you can watch, but don't ask questions. As I said, the process demands absolute focus."

Sunny nodded politely.

After a while, Master Alice finished infusing the scale armor, and everything was ready for the final part of the forging.

The cuirass, as well as all other elements that had been crafted and Infused earlier, were placed in the middle of a large runic circle. Seven shimmering soul shards were positioned around it, each in its own node, while Master Snow knelt and placed his hand on the boundary of the circle.

As he closed his eyes, the runic circle started to emanate a pale glow.

'Curious.'

Sunny was not a great master of runic sorcery, but he did know a few things. From the looks of it, the circle was a rather simple one, meant to channel the Spellsmith's Aspect and add the power of the seven soul shards to his own. It had been created for convenience, not out of necessity.

After all, Master Snow would not have been able to juggle seven soul shards with one hand while keeping the other on the armor.

The fact that the runic circle was shining meant that soul essence was flowing through the conduits, which in turn meant that the Spellsmith was channeling his Aspect.

As the process of enchanting continued, Master Snow raised a hand and directed it at the Infused armor. Strings of golden light seemed to coil around his fingers, and then shot forward, each finding its way to between the tightly interlaid scales.

A moment later, Sunny sensed that the armor was starting to change.

There was an outward change, with the scales slowly beginning to assume a metallic sheen. But there was an invisible change, as well — or rather, invisible to all but Sunny.

He shifted his gaze to the Infused cuirass.

His eyes narrowed a little when he saw what was happening inside it.

Chapter-2052: War Craft

Something similar, but at the same time different to what Master Alice had done to the arrowhead was taking place there.

The tapestry of a complicated spellweave was taking shape inside the armor. Only it wasn't forming all at once, as it had been with the bone arrowhead — instead, the process was more similar to how Sunny would have done it, one step at a time.

It was just that the speed with which the separate strings formed the patterns was astonishingly great… so great, in fact, as to seem instantaneous.

Nevertheless, the result was far worse than what Sunny would have done. The patterns that formed with tremendous speed were crude and messy, almost sloppy. There was no harmony to their flow, no intricate order. It was like a spellweave made by a dilettante.

At first glance.

Then, something strange happened. A pattern which had already been formed suddenly dismantled itself, the constellation of ethereal strings retreating like a tide. That, too, happened in an instant.

A few moments later, the pattern reassembled itself once again, this time looking a little more neat than before.

The process repeated several times. The strings would shoot forward to form a pattern, drift in the void for a few moments, and then retreat. The tapestry expanded and contracted, almost like the beating heart of a living being.

With each iteration, the messy spellweave seemed to improve a little. After a while, it became cohesive enough that Sunny could vaguely guess its purpose, staring at the strangely beautiful spectacle with a

neutral expression.

There was the foundation of a durability enchantment, a heat-resistant enchantment, a strange friction-related enchantment, a weight enchantment…

Master Snow was certainly ambitious with his current project.

'How interesting.'

Sunny tried to make sense of what he was seeing.

The process was completely different from the Forgery Master Alice had demonstrated. She had simply transferred a quality of [being a Memory] from one arrowhead to another — as such, her Aspect power acted in a straightforward manner, without involving the Nightmare Spell.

But Master Snow was attempting something far more ambitious. He had indeed initiated the change inside the armor, allowing it to grow… quite like a living being would.

Currently, he was trying to guide that growth in a particular direction.

And the Nightmare Spell was assisting him.

It was very much like it had assisted Sunny, and even more so like it was assisting Cassie… and all Awakened, in a sense.

By now, it was clear that the direction of the growth an enchanted item experienced depended on the intent of the Spellsmith. Master Snow had called it guiding the form of an item to a more flawless state, and there might have been some truth to his statement. But to Sunny, it seemed like a large part of the change was still dependent on the Spellsmith's own vision, ability, and will.

Master Snow wanted to reshape the armor into a Memory that possessed a number of specific enchantments. However, he could not envision such a spellweave — he was incapable of seeing one, after all, let alone deciphering the complicated and mysterious logic that guided the patterns of essence strings.

What he could envision was the effect he wanted to achieve, though. The toughness of the armor, it's ability to repair itself in the owner's soul, withstand the merciless heat of Godgrave, and so on. Perhaps he knew enough runic sorcery to imagine how these enchantments would have had to look if expressed with runes, or perhaps not.

In any case, the Nightmare Spell was taking his intent… and simply translating it into the language of weaving. Just like it translated the insights Cassie received into runes, or the languages of the inhabitants of Nightmares into one that modern people could understand.

That was how Spellsmiths were able to create Memories.

The true powers of this branch of the Valor family most likely lie in special perception, an ability to unlock the potential of things, and then both guide and enhance their growth… at least of those things that were born from craftsmanship, conscious design, and skill.

It was a beautiful representation of the intersection between several domains of War God — craft, intelligence, and progress, all expressed through a struggle akin to that of life itself... to be used for war.

The Spell simply provided Spellsmiths with minor assistance, which, among other things, allowed them to include its own language into their repertoire.

Sunny could not help but wonder what Master Snow would have been able to do without that assistance. He would have been able to stimulate the growth of inanimate objects, still, as well as infuse them with special qualities… but most likely only those that he could personally understand and envision.

If he knew what being cut by a sharp blade felt like, he would have been able to guide a weapon to great sharpness. If he was familiar with runic sorcery, he would have been able to imbue the weapon with runic enchantments. The result still would have been quite astonishing — but it would not have included an element of weaving, which Spellsmiths neither knew nor understood.

But even with the help of the Nightmare Spell, the process wasn't

easy.

The messy state of the supposed spellweave and its repeated failures to reach the desired state were proof. It was probably not easy for Master Snow to keep his intent sharp and find the one correct path to what he wanted to achieve among countless possibilities.

He was struggling.

Suddenly, Sunny wanted to see what it looked like when Anvil forged a sword. The nature of the process must have been similar… but his skill and intent would be infinitely more honed and precise.

It was a shame that Sunny had never witnessed the King working in the forge, and would never get that chance in the future, either.

Eventually, Master Alice approached and bowed with a sigh.

"This is going to take a while. In fact, for a Memory like this, the forging usually continues for many days… it can end in failure, as well."

Sunny shook his head.

"It's alright. Thank you. I have already seen everything I wanted to see."

The petite woman beamed.

"That is nice to hear! Then, Master Sunless, come back any time you wish. Lady Changing Star… I hope I will be able to forge Memories for you to use on the battlefield, one day."

Seeing the earnest look in her eyes, Sunny had no heart to tell Master Alice that her hope was unlikely to come true.

Nephis was too powerful to have use for most Memories…

And she had him, too.

Soon enough, the two of them left the crafting hall. Sunny was thinking deeply about something.

As they left the Valor Keep, Nephis glanced at him and asked:

"Well? Was it helpful?"

Sunny slowly shook his head, then nodded.

"No — and yes. I did not exactly get inspired, but I did gain confidence in the path I had been walking all along."

Then, his eyes glistened, and his lips twisted into a mischievous smile.

He lingered for a moment, and then added neutrally:

"Oh, but most importantly. Looking at them, I finally found a way to cheat the process…"

Chapter-2053: Stolen Credit

Witnessing the two enchanters at work had been of benefit to Sunny.

Firstly, it had satiated his curiosity. The hidden heart of the Great Clan Valor — its craftsmen — were quite a fascinating bunch… even more so than he had thought. Sunny had assumed that Clan Valor simply possessed a natural affinity to Aspects that allowed Awakened to create Memories, but the truth was more complicated.

Instead, there was an intricate and beautifully ingenious synergy between three different groups of Awakened artisans, with each group boasting its own unique range of powers that complimented those of the other two. Both the conceptual design and practical execution of this system were quite admirable, and gave Sunny a lot of food for thought.

But he had benefitted in a more palpable way, as well.

Sunny could not deny the fact that it had felt gratifying, to learn that he had surpassed most of the enchanters of the Great Clan Valor. The path to becoming a capable sorcerer has been long and arduous, so it felt validating, to see how much more refined and sophisticated his sorcery was when compared to others.

And how much more it could achieve.

So, Sunny was now more confident in himself. Confidence was not going to help him achieve success in and of itself, but it did matter. The forging he was planning to undertake tomorrow was going to be a difficult challenge, so his mindset was important.

And there was another thing, as well…

Sunny had been inspired by visiting the forgemasters, after all… in a sense.

Strangely enough, the spark of inspiration had not come from watching Master Alice perform a Forgery of the bone arrowhead. It had not come from watching her Infuse an item, either.

Even the beautifully disturbing sight of a spellweave being born in the scale cuirass was not the source of Sunny's epiphany.

Instead… it was watching Master Snow craft the armor in the preparation for the enchantment.

Back then, Sunny had noted that the man must have been a perfectionist — because he had crafted the scale armor in too precise of a manner, doing extra work despite the fact that Memories rearranged themselves to fit the bodies of their owners anyway.

That was one of the rudimentary enchantments granted to each Memory by the Nightmare Spell. So, even if someone's craft was a little messy, the Spell would correct it on its own.

And that was what inspired Sunny.

Because he had realized that he had been unnecessarily ignoring one of the most powerful tools at his disposal… the Nightmare Spell.

Sunny was cut off from the Spell, so it was useless to him.

However, Nephis was not.

Nephis was still a carrier of the Nightmare Spell, and she still received its help. The Spell continued to translate dead languages for her, whispering into her ear, and granting her Memories for slaying foes.

The armor-type Memories would fit themselves to her body, the hilts of the weapon-type Memories would accommodate the size of her palm… and so on.

The assistance of the Nightmare Spell did not end with this minor benefit, either. There were more profound ways in which the Spell assisted Awakened — just like it had assisted Sunny in creating Shadows, was helping Cassie translate the insights of her Dormant Ability, and providing the forgemasters of Valor with a way to create

Memories.

In the case of Nephis, the Spell was not involved in her Aspect too much. The most it had done in that regard was providing her with an Aspect Legacy.

However…

Who said that Sunny could not exploit the Nightmare Spell just because he was banished from it?

Sunny, the creator of the Memory, was not a carrier of the Nightmare Spell, but Nephis — the recipient of the Memory and the person to whose soul it was going to be bound — still was. Since the binding was going to happen inside the soul of a carrier of the Nightmare Spell, the Spell would have no choice but to become involved in the process.

If there was ever a reason for the Nightmare Spell to take action, it would.

Therefore, Sunny could very well use its generosity.

As they walked toward the Ivory Island, he smiled subtly.

In truth, he did not have to create a perfect soulboud Memory. He could just create a Memory that was close enough to being soulbound, and let the Nightmare Spell fit it to Neph's soul itself.

Wouldn't that be perfect?

Not only would his chances of success increase tremendously, but he would also be able to observe the final changes the Spell made, and the way it interfered with the process. Armed with this last bit of knowledge, he would be able to master the creation of soulbound Memories entirely, and then use that knowledge to make a few of those for himself.

'It's perfect.'

Of course, that did not mean that Sunny could relax. He had to create a solid foundation for the Nightmare Spell to build upon… or rather,

he had to create everything well enough for the Spell to deign it necessary to make the final touches.

He could handle that, though.

Everything was ready.

Well… almost everything. He just needed Cassie's help with the last part.

***

Some time later, Nephis was sitting on her bed with an incredulous expression.

Sunny, meanwhile, was on his knees, crawling around the bed.

After a while, she sighed and said in a neutral tone:

"You know, this was not what I expected when you said that we had urgent business in the bedroom."

Sunny finished drawing the last line of a runic circle Cassie had taught him how to draw, and looked up at her with a mischievous smile.

"Oh? What did you expect?"

Nephis coughed.

"Well… I don't know. A war council, perhaps."

Sunny grinned.

"No… it's just this. Plus, you can't really blame me. Your living quarters are just one huge chamber, so the entire floor is technically your bedroom. Get some walls in here if you want to avoid misunderstandings!"

Shaking her head, Nephis leaned back and sighed.

"I like the space, though."

She paused for a moment, then added with a small smile:

"...And the misunderstandings."

Sunny chuckled.

Then, he took a deep breath and remained motionless for a few moments.

It was time.

"Summon the Dream Blade, please. Let's begin..."

Chapter-2054: Dreams of Fire

Some time later, Sunny descended the steps to the basement of the Marvelous Mimic alone. His expression was distant, and he was carrying a beautiful silver longsword in his hands.

Entering the workshop, he looked around its dark expanse. Shadows had reigned in this place unopposed before, but now, there were pure white flames burning in the tall furnace. Their radiant light pushed the shadows back, making them shrink while growing darker.

Sunny glanced at the furnace and sighed.

It was already showing signs of irreparable damage. Changing Star's flames were simply too ferocious — they destroyed everything they touched, and neither furnaces nor crucibles, even those made from mystical materials, could contain them for long.

So, most of his forge would have to be replaced after today.

It was a pity, since procuring this equipment had been both difficult and costly for him. However, it was also unavoidable… as Sunny's power grew, so did the potency of the sorcerous components he had to use. If not today, he would have had to renovate his forge sooner or later.

Adding more fuel to the furnace, Sunny walked over to the anvil — a new one, crafted roughly from a splinter of the dead god's bone — placed the Dream Blade on its surface, and peered at it.

The spellweave of the silver longsword was relatively simple, but beautiful. It was an exceptional Memory, by all accounts… otherwise, it would not have been able to serve Nephis for so long despite its modest Rank and Tier.

Of course, Sunny could not summon the runes and learn about it

from the Spell. In fact, he could not even receive the Memory from Nephis without altering its spellweave first — which he had not done, since that would have defeated the purpose of what he was intending to do.

Still, Sunny could easily learn what was written in the silver blade's runes. After all, he had woven many names and descriptions into the weaves of various Memories — finding the strings expressing them and translating the ethereal patterns into familiar runes was not at all difficult for him.

Sunny studied the weave.

Memory: Dream Blade.

Memory Rank: Dormant.

Memory Type: Weapon.

Memory Description: [...Lost in the darkness, a lonely soul once dreamt of fire.]

He smiled faintly. That was all. There was no mention of the Tier, no list of its enchantments, and no description of what those enchantments could do. That was how most Awakened perceived their Memories.

It was only because of attaining Blood Weave that the Spell added more runes to what Sunny saw. Of course, it was merely translating what he could find out himself by examining the weave — the rest of the Awakened either had to find out the true potential of their Memories by trial and error or hire professional appraisers.

'It saved me so much money…'

He glanced at the description of the Dream Blade one more time. The runes expressed by the pattern of ethereal strings were, as always, a little ambiguous. They could mean that a lonely soul once dreamt of fire while lost in darkness… or maybe longed for warmth.

In fact, the description could have also meant:

[Sealed in the void, a forsaken soul desired warmth.]

Darkness, void. Dreaming, longing. Fire, warmth. And desire.

…It was a little ominous, knowing what he knew now.

Shaking his head, Sunny turned away from the pattern of ethereal strings expressing runes. Instead, he studied the weave of the Dream Blade itself.

Its single enchantment was quite intricate, but simple in function. It was meant to grant the wielder of the silver longsword resistance against soul attacks — a moderate amount of it, which was an incredible feat for a Memory of such a low Rank.

Sunny appreciated the beauty of the intricate design of the radiant spellweave, then sighed and raised his fist.

Bringing it down on the silver blade, he easily shattered it into countless pieces.

***

The Ivory Island was bathed in sunlight. A warm breeze caressed the pristine white walls of the Tower of Hope, sent ripples across the surface of the lake, and made the leaves of the ancient grove rustle peacefully.

Nephis was standing on the edge of the island, looking into the distance with a somber expression. After a while, she heard soft footsteps approaching her from behind, and heard a familiar voice.

"What are you thinking about?"

She turned and looked at the beautiful young man with pale skin and raven-black hair who was standing a few steps away, dressed in garments made of shadows.

"...Godgrave."

The young man raised an eyebrow, and his onyx eyes glistened with a hint of curiosity.

"What about it?"

Nephis looked away and continued to study the horizon.

After a while, she said evenly:

"Some people believe that Godgrave is what remains of a god. But I think that they are wrong… or rather, that they are right for the wrong reason."

He smiled.

"How so?"

Nephis looked up.

"...The sky above is what remains of a god. The ground below is, too. But that giant skeleton has nothing to do with one of the gods… it is far too small, insignificant, and paltry."

The young man considered her words for a few moments.

"So, what you are saying is that no one has been able to find the corpses of the gods… because the ground we walk on and the skies we live under themselves are their remains? That our world is not simply the Realm of the War God, but also her corpse?"

She nodded and looked at him with a wistful expression.

"Gods... are vast, Sunny."

He chuckled.

"Well, that makes it sound as if we humans are no different from maggots that were born to feast on the flesh of a dead god. Of course, one can also be more generous and interpret it as us being War God's children. Children of War… sounds quite fitting, considering our track record."

Nephis looked away once more, this time a hint of a sad smile on her lips.

After a while, she said:

"That would mean that all of us were born from a dead mother. That all of us are orphans."

Just like she had been, and was.

She lingered for a few moments, and then spoke in an even tone:

"You have three shadows today."

The young man smiled.

"That I do."

She frowned slightly, as if remembering that she had forgotten something, and asked after a short pause:

"When will we start forging the sword?"

He walked over to the edge of the island to stand side by side with her and looked at the horizon, as well.

"We have already started."

Finally, Nephis seemed to understand something. She looked at him with curiosity, hesitated for a few moments, and asked:

"This is a dream, isn't it?"

He laughed quietly.

"Yes, it is."

There was no warcamp around them. No titanic skeleton below the Ivory Island, no overcast sky above it.

Instead, the Ivory Island was drifting in the air above a calm ocean. The world was suffused with sunlight, and the perfectly still water below glowed beautifully, reflecting the brilliance of heaven. It was as if they were flying above a radiant sea of liquid gold, awash in breathtaking radiance.

Above them, seven pure suns burned brightly in the vast expanse of a brilliant sky.

It was a dream of her Soul Sea.

Chapter-2055: Soul Forge

Sunny had considered many ways to bind a Memory to Neph's soul. Eventually, he had come to believe that the most convenient way to establish a bond between the sword and her soul — at least among those available to him — would be to forge it simultaneously in the real world and in her Soul Sea.

Sadly, he could not enter it — a fact that had made him envy Mordret for the first time in his life.

So, after contemplating for a long time, Sunny had decided on the next best thing…

He was going to reforge the Dream Blade simultaneously in the real world and in Neph's dream.

Master Sunless was in the forge, but the Lord of Shadows had called upon Nightmare and used the tenebrous steed to enter her dreams. The runic circle Cassie had taught him how to draw was meant to make the dream more malleable, give Nephis more control over it, and keep her asleep for a long as was needed to finish the forging.

And Nephis… currently, Nephis was dreaming of her Soul Sea.

Sunny enjoyed the breathtaking beauty of it for a while. His own dark and lightless soul had its own charm, yes… but this world of golden radiance and pure sunlight was simply wondrous to behold.

Like heaven.

Something told Sunny that it could be quite inhospitable when entered uninvited, though. Otherwise, the Soul Stealer would not have perished within it so miserably after Nephis annihilated Twilight.

Seven brilliant suns, a vast expanse of radiant water below. And the beautiful island drifting in the air between the two.

It seemed that the replica of the Tower of Hope had appeared in Neph's Soul Sea, just like a replica of the Nameless Temple had appeared in his. Of course, there was no legion of silent shadows to surround it.

Sunny suspected that there was something similar here, however. Perhaps if the seven suns rolled over the horizon, thrusting the calm ocean into the embrace of night, he would see countless stars burning on the velvet background of the black sky — each representing one of the souls inspired by Neph's longing.

They were currently standing at the edge of the island, looking over the golden ocean of light. Nightmare was also here, on the other side of the island… grazing on the emerald grass peacefully. The sight made Sunny feel quite bewildered, since he had never seen his steed eat anything except the bleeding flesh of his enemies before.

Perhaps dream grass was just as tasty.

Sadly, Sunny could not keep him here for long. It was already risky enough to bring Nightmare away from his mark, which had barely been lulled into slumber and could awaken at any moment if left unattended.

Nephis looked at him silently for a few moments, then smiled.

"So… it seems that you are the man of my dreams, then, Lord Shadow."

Sunny gave her an elegant bow.

"As long as you'll have me, Lady Changing Star. It's an honor."

She chuckled melodiously, then looked at him seriously.

"So, what do I need to do, then?"

He walked closer to her, took one of her hands gently, and placed it on his chest.

Then, looking Nephis in the eyes, Sunny said:

"Please give me some of your fire."

Nephis expression changed subtly, but then, she activated her Dormant Ability. Her hand ignited with a soft white radiance, and a wonderful warmth spread through Sunny's body.

And with it, a powerful torrent of her essence.

Behind him, his three shadows rose from the ground, turning into identical copies of him. Each manifested four additional hands, ready to start weaving strings of radiant essence.

The seven suns bathed them in radiant light.

***

In the real world, the shattered sword shimmered on the bone anvil. It suddenly became less substantial, collapsing into a whirlwind of sparks… that was what happened when a Memory was destroyed.

However, this time, Sunny did not let the sparks of light dissipate into nothingness.

Instead, he grasped them, directing their flow according to his will.

At the same time, he thrust his shadow hands into the disappearing image of the sword, preventing its weave from collapsing.

One had to destroy first in order to rebuild.

But Sunny did not want the Dream Blade gone. He wanted to retain its essence while being reborn under his hammer.

While his original body was keeping the Dream Blade in a state between existence and destruction, his avatar fanned the furious white flames burning in the furnace and placed the crucible on them.

The materials needed to create alloy were already inside — the ice of the Winter Beast, the blessed metals, and a few others.

There was one more step to be made.

Standing above the crucible, Sunny hesitated for a moment, then summoned the simple silver knife he had forged earlier. Raising his hands, he grimaced and sliced his palm open with the knife, then willed himself to bleed.

A stream of crimson blood poured into the crucible, soon turning into ice.

As the crucible heated, it would melt, fusing with the incandescent alloy.

And thus, it would serve as the binding between the various elements of the sword.

Was there a more fitting ingredient to create a Memory than the blood of Weaver?

Sunny was not sure.

He was concentrating on too many tasks at the same time.

Forging the physical vessel of the sword.

Keeping the original blade in the state of being disassembled to its most basic elements, but not quite destroyed.

Weaving strings of essence in Neph's dream…

Each task demanded utmost concentration.

How long would he be able to endure this pressure?

Hopefully, long enough to finish forging the slaying blade.

Suddenly, a soft white radiance poured out of the cut on his palm, and the shallow wound disappeared without a trace.

Sunny allowed himself to be surprised for a fraction of the moment, then concentrated on his task.

Summoning Weaver's Needle, he reached into the collapsing

spellweave of the Dream Blade and carefully wove a new string into its intricate pattern…

Chapter-2056: Living Alloy

The forge had become permeated by an almost unbearable heat. Sunny fanned the flames, watching as the blessed iron slowly turned into an incandescent liquid inside the crucible. His pale body was covered in sweat, and the scales of his intricate tattoo glistened in the radiance of the white flame like black gemstones.

The iron melted, poured over the remains of Winter Beast's icy heart, and froze solid again. The process repeated over and over, until the ice finally started to melt itself.

Sunny watched it with a distant expression.

'...I am glad.'

He had felt great joy after destroying the Winter Beast to avenge millions of its victims… and himself. But it was a sad thing, really, to end the story of their tragic deaths with another act of destruction.

So, Sunny was happy to see that the final chapter in the story of Falcon Scott would be an act of creation instead. That the heart of the Winter Beast would lay the foundation for the forging of a remarkable sword — a sword that would excel in sowing death, but was ultimately destined to save countless lives.

It was as if he was pouring all those orphaned souls into the mystical alloy.

How heavy would a blade carrying the weight of millions of souls be?

…Sunny's blood was also there, added to the mix. Strangely enough, he could still vaguely sense it, and even exert a little bit of control over it, as if his blood was still alive despite being expelled from his body. And since it served as the binding agent between the various elements of the alloy, the alloy was becoming a little bit alive, too.

Granted, there was no need for his blood to bind the mystical ice and the blessed metals together. That could have happened naturally, just as it had happened the other day.

However…

For this next part, the presence of his blood was necessary.

Wiping the sweat off his brow, Sunny inhaled the scorching air deeply, and then picked up an ominous black arrow from a nearby workbench.

The arrow seemed quite mundane at first glance. Its shaft was made from dark wood, its fletching was fashioned from raven feathers, and the arrowhead had been carved from a piece of black obsidian. But the arrow was not mundane at all — it was one of the two arrows from the Shadow Realm that Sunny possessed.

A daunting souvenir of the Realm of Death.

Letting out a quiet sigh, Sunny gritted his teeth and grasped the arrow tightly in his hands. Taut muscles rolled under his skin like steel cables, and the coils of the Soul Serpent seemed to move. As ragged breath escaped from his lips, the black arrow shattered.

It was incredibly tough, rivaling the durability of Supreme Memories. However, Sunny was a Transcendent Terror… his strength was truly terrifying, and his will was adamantine.

Breaking the arrowhead off the shaft, he grasped the piece of sharp obsidian in his fist and crushed it into dust, paying no attention to the blood pouring to the floor.

Then, he poured the obsidian dust and the blood into the crucible. He threw the splintered shaft there, as well.

The fletching caught fire first, swiftly turning into ash. The dark wood of the arrow's shaft drowned in the incandescent liquid, and was then incinerated in its depths. The obsidian dust mixed with the alloy.

His blood acted as a medium, helping the alloy inherit the intangible

quality of the destroyed arrow — the cold, deadly sense of finality that it had possessed. The eerie breath of the Realm of Death.

With that done, the alloy was almost ready.

All that remained was the final step.

His other self was still preoccupied with preventing the Dream Blade from collapsing. He was holding its weave together, and at the same time guiding the stream of ethereal sparks that swirled in the air, ready to dissipate, but not quite able to.

As the incandescent liquid in the crucible seemed to reach a state of equilibrium, neither growing hotter nor cooling off, Sunny guided the stream of sparks into a mold.

And as they entered it obediently…

He held his breath, picked up the crucible, and poured the blessed alloy over them.

The radiant stream of incandescent metal swallowed the sparks of essence, making them a part of itself.

And just like that, the anchor of the intricate spellweave shifted from the concept of a silver longsword to the mass of liquid metal.

Sunny sighed in relief, knowing that this part of the plan had worked as intended, at least. He was not sure that it would… after all, he had never attempted something like that before.

But there was something that Sunny realized while experimenting to prepare for this forging. It was that at this level of craft, the will of the craftsman was like a blacksmith's hammer in and of itself.

It, too, was a tool to forge metal into a desired shape… or maybe even reality itself.

So if his will was sharp and tyrannical enough, many things would become possible simply because he willed them. Of course, the more his will went against the will of the world, the more difficult it was to enforce it.

In this case, the desired result was a relatively minor divergence. And since Sunny's Transcendent will had been tempered and sharpened by countless trials, he achieved it without too much problem.

'Now… the forging.'

As soon as the blessed alloy cooled off enough to become solid, Sunny removed the glowing bar of hot metal from the mold and placed it on the anvil.

The coils of his serpentine tattoo moved as Serpent slithered down his arm, manifesting itself into a weapon.

However, this time, it was not an odachi. Instead, it was a blacksmith's hammer made from dark, lusterless obsidian.

Gripping the Soul Weapon tightly, Sunny raised it above his head, and then brought it down on the glowing metal.

A rain of incandescent sparks shot in all directions, and the Marvelous Mimic quaked.

Chapter-2057: Learning Weave

As Sunny was preparing to forge the sword in the real world, he was also concentrating on creating its weave in a dream.

Six of his seven incarnations were involved in the forging, each having to deal with a task that demanded utmost concentration — some even doing things that he had never done or attempted before.

As a result, his mind was under enormous pressure, not quite cracking under it, but definitely on the very verge of being unable to endure.

Nevertheless, Sunny persisted with a calm and determined expression. He was not a stranger to these moments of extreme stress — in fact, he thrived in them. The more dire the situation was, the more clear his mind would become. That sense of clarity transcended the mundane at times, allowing him to enter a strange and inexplicable mental state.

Sunny was in that state right now, feeling as if his mind was operating at a speed that even he himself could not perceive.

Many things that he could not quite explain, but intuitively understood, were happening around him and because of him. Therefore, even though he knew that there was a clear cause and effect to everything he did, it almost felt as though reality was simply changing according to his sheer will.

He was in uncharted territory, but there was a beacon guiding him to a safe harbor.

Standing on the edge of a dreamlike island, Sunny inhaled deeply.

Four of his incarnations were here, in the dream Nephis was dreaming about her Soul Sea. One served as a conduit for her

essence, two more were weaving radiant strings out of it, and the final one was doing the most important part of the task — he was creating the vast, intricate, and inspired spellweave that Sunny had envisioned for the soulbound sword.

The weave he wanted to create was ambitious even by his standards — and that was without taking into account the unique property of binding the Memory to its master's soul. Therefore, this act of sorcery was promising to be long and punishing, akin to a dire marathon.

However…

A vital moment — perhaps the most vital moment of the entire forging — had to happen at the very start.

It had to happen now.

Looking at Nephis, Sunny forced out a weak smile.

"Do you trust me?"

He was aware that his question was not very fair. After all, as far as Nephis knew, they had only met a few months ago. Trust did not come easy to either of them — it was something that both of them had to build slowly and arduously…

"I do."

The calm answer came almost instantly.

Sunny was surprised by her blunt words. Nephis… seemed to be surprised by them, too. She frowned lightly, as if not entirely sure why she had answered so readily, as well as so easily.

Nevertheless, Sunny's smile grew more relaxed at hearing it.

"Good. Then, if you sense something, don't resist. Let it happen."

With that, he did something both perfectly reasonable and entirely crazy.

He anchored the spellweave — but not in a soul shard, as he had

always done before.

Instead, he anchored the radiant strings of essence directly in one of Neph's soul cores.

Her Beast Core, to be precise.

Her eyes widened slightly.

Sunny tensed, not sure if his weaving would hold. After all, he was not even sure that something like that was possible, let alone doable.

But he believed that it was.

He wanted it to be.

They were in a dream, after all. Why would it not be possible here?

Of course, he couldn't just… weave the soul of a living being. At least not yet. But that was not what he was trying to do — he was simply trying to anchor the weave of a Memory in a living soul instead of in a shard that remained after the soul was destroyed.

He felt Neph's warm hand trembling softly on his chest.

But… nothing else happened.

Her soul core did not reject the weave. The incinerating white flames did not annihilate the radiant strings of soul essence — after all, those strings had been woven out of the same flame.

The anchor held.

A wide grin split his face apart. Seeing it, Nephis smiled tentatively, too.

"What just happened?"

He exhaled slowly.

"I anchored the spellweave of the sword in one of your soul cores."

That vital — and quite daring — part of the forging had ended in

success.

Then, Sunny's smile dimmed a little.

"Well… I anchored a dream of a spellweave in the dream of your soul core, at least."

Now…

He just had to make their dreams come true.

But before that, the entire vast, unimaginable spellweave needed to be complete.

Taking another deep breath, Sunny allowed his incarnation to close his eyes and concentrated on channeling Neph's essence.

The incarnation responsible for weaving the tapestry of radiant strings continued its work somberly.

The vast spellweave was starting to slowly, arduously, take shape.

It was a daunting thing to do.

Sunny had rejected the familiar comfort of merely copying the patterns created by the Nightmare Spell. Instead, he was weaving entirely new patterns of his own design. Armed with his deep knowledge of weaving and the experience of fusing with various Memories as a shadow, he was attempting to create an enchanted sword that would become a part of Neph's body and soul.

A sword that suited her flawlessly, would grow with her, and could cut down the most harrowing of foes.

Naturally, such a sword demanded the most ingenious of enchantments.

Somewhere in the real world, his other incarnations were forging the physical vessel of the sword. He had used precious materials to create the alloy for it — the heart of the Winter Beast, a treasury of blessed metals, the arrow of the Shadow Realm, Neph's soul flame, and even his own blood.

But really, those materials were not quite as important as it seemed.

Because his sword would be a living thing, and therefore, would grow and change as a living thing.

The spellweave was the same. Before, Sunny had only ever created weaves that were strictly limited by their design. But this weave… this weave was meant to be different.

It was just as intricately designed, just as purposefully crafted. But it was also not as strict, aiming to be merely the beginning instead of the unchangeable end.

As Nephis grew, the spellweave of her sword was meant to grow as well.

Grow more powerful, but also, if need be… different.

The most frightening thing in the world was that which was unknown. And since both Sunny and Nephis had set their hearts on waging war against the world, they were fated to fight against the unknown. They were destined to face dreadful threats they had no prior knowledge of, and therefore could not prepare for.

Thus, the most deadly of swords…

Was a sword that had the ability to learn.

Chapter-2058: Shadow Forge

In the forge, sweat rolled down Sunny's body as he hammered the incandescent bar of blessed alloy. Furious white sparks danced in the air — these ones not the immaterial sparks of soul essence, but the very real, white-hot particles of burning metal. The heat was sweltering, and the shadows flowed as the brilliant flames danced in the immolating furnace.

Sunny would have already singed his hair and received countless terrible burns if not for the Onyx Shell, which protected him against heat and fire. His expression was focused, and his hand was steady, delivering devastating blows with the black hammer at a steady rhythm.

The cadence of his blows and the ringing of metal filled the dark expanse of the forge chamber, which was hidden from the world in its own dimension, with a furious, but beautiful melody.

The force he unleashed with each blow was enough to shatter the gates of a castle and topple its walls, sunder mountains and split the earth. However, the blessed alloy resisted it stubbornly, putting up an exhausting fight.

Still… Sunny was not one to lose a battle.

He hammered the bar of alloy to flatten it, then folded it and repeated the process — again, and again, and again, layering the blessed steel over itself countless times. This was not done to remove impurities — there were none — but rather to make the composition of the future blade uniform, spreading the ashes, the obsidian dust, and the remnants of his blood across its length evenly.

From time to time, he would thrust the bar of alloy back into the furnace and allow the incinerating white flames burning within to lick it freely. He also steadily fed more fuel to the fire — wood of the

ancient, abominable trees that grew in the Hollows of Godgrave, and from the Burned Forest as well.

And then, at some point…

Something strange happened.

The fire suddenly grew weaker, forcing him to add more fuel to feed it, and do it more frequently. Sunny studied the furnace for a few moments before realizing what was happening.

The blessed alloy was absorbing the soul flame. Every time he thrust it into the furnace, the incandescent metal drank the fire like a man dying of thirst in the desert. As such, the holy white flame permeated the alloy, changing it on a fundamental level and becoming one with it.

And at the same time, the weave of the Memory he was still keeping from collapsing blazed with a new radiance, infused with the flame, as well.

The ethereal string of essence suddenly burned his fingers, and his inky-black hands caught fire. For a few moments, the hands made of shadows were wreathed in blinding white flame. Then, they started to crumble. Only Weaver's Needle, which he held in his real hand, remained unaffected, still emanating a soft golden glow.

But one needle was not enough.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny endured the blinding pain and called upon the shadows, rebuilding his hands at the same speed as the flames were devouring them. Just like that, he continued to weave while burning — suffering, being turned to ash, and then being reborn from the shadows.

His already pale face turned deathly white, but Sunny did not halt his work even for a moment.

Just as his other incarnation was weaving a vast tapestry of essence strings in the dream world, he was doing the same here, repeating its every motion with absolute precision.

At first, the two spellweaves were identical. But soon, the patterns of essence strings diverged, each creating a unique tapestry. These tapestries, however, were intimately tied — each was one part of a single whole, meant to be seamlessly connected like two pieces of a vast puzzle.

The forging hall of the Marvelous Mimic was filled with deafening ringing, flashes of light, and unbearable heat for a while.

After some time — an eternity, perhaps — Sunny wiped the sweat off his brow and inhaled deeply, feeling the sizzling air scorch his burning lungs. His muscles were burning, too, having endured more strain than they would have in the most dire of battles.

But he was finally satisfied with the alloy, having judged that it was ready to be shaped.

Thrusting the incandescent bar of blessed metal into the furnace one more time, he allowed himself a moment of respite. The cool water from the Endless Spring touched his lips and flowed into his parched throat, replenishing his strength and making him feel a sense of tranquil bliss.

Pouring some of it on his head, Sunny shook his wet hair and let out a satisfied sigh. Then, grasping the handle he had fashioned out of scrap metal, he pulled the blessed alloy out of the furnace and placed it on the anvil once again.

'Grow heavy…'

Raising the Soul Serpent, he made his hand as heavy as a mountain with the help of the Onyx Shell and delivered another crushing hammer blow to the radiant metal.

Now, it was time to shape the sword.

Alternating between heavy blows that were meant to draw out the metal and light blows to shape it, Sunny set about the difficult task of turning the bar of the blessed alloy into a blade.

He was forging a longsword — Neph's preferred type of sword, as well as the original form of the Dream Blade. The blade had to be

more than a meter long, with a very slight taper, and the tang adding another thirty centimeters or so. In the end, the entire sword would be close to one and a half meters in length, which was a lot of steel to forge, quench, temper, polish, and sharpen.

There was also the crossguard, the pommel, and the hilt to be fashioned and fitted onto the tang.

There could be no mistake, no time to rest.

The work was only just starting…

Absolutely focused, Sunny continued to hammer the blessed alloy. The incandescent metal stretched out under his blows, turning into a semblance of a long, narrow blade…

Sweat poured down his face, boiling and evaporating moments later.

***

In Neph's dream, Sunny continued to create the weave.

It was vast and infinitely complex — much more complicated than what he was simultaneously creating in the forge of the Marvelous Mimic.

But that was only to be expected. After all, the real Dream Blade was merely a Dormant Memory of the First Tier. It had only one dim node to serve as the anchor for the ethereal strings, while here… here, Sunny had seven Transcendent soul cores to use as the foundation.

And not just any soul cores, at that — the soul cores of a person who possessed [The Fire], the lineage Attribute of Sun God, which made the soul especially potent.

So, Sunny could allow himself some freedom.

And he was using that freedom both fully and unapologetically, weaving an inspired tapestry that combined all his attainment in sorcery, serving as his crowning achievement.

Even though his fingers bled, and his mind reeled on the verge of

collapse, Sunny continued to weave with a subtle smile on his face.

His fingers healed moments later, anyway, awash in Neph's warmth.

After a while, one of his incarnations staggered and fell to its knees, looking down with a pained expression. Then, it continued to weave strings of essence strings while kneeling on the ground.

Nephis looked at him with concern.

"What is happening?"

The incarnation of Sunny who was receiving her flame opened its eyes and smiled faintly.

"...I just burned my soul a little. Nothing serious."

She studied him silently.

"You look… a little off."

He simply shook his head.

"It's fine. I am just a bit… overwhelmed. The mental pressure is staggering, but my concentration can't be broken. So, I am shutting down things that serve no purpose."

Sunny had forced some of his incarnations to close their eyes, so that absorbing visual data did not strain his mind. He had abandoned listening to his shadow sense altogether. If an incarnation did not need to stand, he stopped trying to keep it standing. Anything that was not connected to forging the sword or weaving its enchantments was being sacrificed…

And even then, he was barely managing. Even the vision of those incarnations that had to see was slowly turning blurry, and his coordination was suffering.

Nephis frowned.

"Why are you wasting energy on an unimportant thing like talking to me, then?"

Sunny smiled wider.

"Talking to you can never be unimportant."

Then, his gaze lost focus, and his expression grew absent.

With a sigh, he closed his eyes again.

"It has… been so long, already… but that's alright… it will be finished soon…"

Indeed, the forging had continued for countless hours — he had lost count of them, at least. But the final part was swiftly approaching.

Out there in the forge, his original body had already shaped the blade. Currently, billowing clouds of scorching steam were rising from the vessel where the sword was being quenched. They had already filled the forge entirely, but the incandescent blade was still refusing to cool down.

Sunny was pouring more water from the Endless Spring into the vessel, threatening to empty the beautiful glass bottle for the first time in a decade.

Then, he would have to polish and grind the blade to sharpen it, affix the crossguard, fit the hilt on the tang, and put the pommel in place.

The spellweave here in the dream was not far from reaching the point of near-completion, as well — granted, even that small distance seemed dreadful and daunting to Sunny, who was mentally exhausted and physically drained, almost more so than he was able to endure.

After that, the most important part of the forging would be upon him.

He would have to connect the real version of the sword to its dream counterpart, thus completing the last enchantment.

And binding the blade to Neph's soul.

…The second of his incarnations staggered and fell down.

Sunny inhaled deeply.

'One last push.'

His hands moved with stunning speed and beautiful grace, expanding the vast tapestry of radiant strings even further.

Chapter-2059: Final Step

By the time Sunny was nearly finished with the weave, two of his four incarnations had collapsed and turned into shadows. The shadows then crawled across the emerald grass tiredly before wrapping themselves around the third.

That third incarnation, which had been responsible for weaving the vast and intricate tapestry of radiant strings, did not look too good itself. Its four shadow hands had been shredded and rebuilt so many times that their shape was now vague and immaterial, not quite intangible, but also far from being solid.

And although the countless terrible burns and bone-deep cuts he had suffered were already healed by the purifying white flames, the burden of having suffered them remained, making him look ragged and frail. His eyes were like two pools of deep darkness, obscuring the fragile state of his exhausted mind.

Sunny took a deep breath, and then allowed the four shadow hands to dissolve into nothingness. At the same time, the incarnation standing in front of Nephis swayed and collapsed into a shadow, as well. The warmth permeating his entire being ceased, leaving him feeling cold and alone.

Nephis looked at him with a silent question.

Sunny smiled weakly.

"I wish... you could see it."

Above them, below them, all around them… the world was permeated by a grand weave of radiant strings. They stretched in all directions, almost invisible in the breathtaking brilliance of the seven suns, reflecting in the resplendent ocean of the Soul Sea like a constellation map of a vast and distant heaven.

It was utterly beautiful.

It was also a weave of a much greater scale than anything he had ever created before, and his masterpiece — if he could be so bold as to praise himself so unapologetically.

No one else in this era could perceive spellweaves, anyway, so there was nobody to praise him but himself.

Sunny sighed.

"It is almost finished… I hope you slept well."

Out in the real world, his original body knelt on the floor, breathing raggedly. He pressed his forehead against the floor, hoping to find a reprieve from the scorching inferno of the overheated forge… but there was no coolness to be found, and therefore no respite.

The forging was over.

A beautiful silver longsword lay on the anvil in front of him. Its elegant blade was long and narrow, flawlessly sharp. Its crossguard was straight and devoid of useless adornments. Its hilt was carved from a piece of ivory, while its pommel was cast from the same silvery alloy.

Even laying there motionlessly, the sword emanated an oppressive feeling of cold, inevitable lethality, as if simply touching it could draw blood and rob one of their very life.

It was deadly and beautiful… just like the woman it was meant for.

Forging it had been a daunting trial.

Sunny was utterly drained and exhausted, both physically and mentally. He had barely remembered the last time he was that tired — and in such pain, as well.

The memory of his hands being burned by the white flames made him shudder. He had suffered the harrowing agony for many hours, each feeling like an eternity. Every moment, every movement, every breath had felt like hell.

…But the appalling torment had been helpful to him, too.

Because feeling a distant echo of the pain Nephis felt every time she used her Aspect strengthened his determination to forge a sword worthy of her resolve, and imbue the essence of the sword with it.

He had forged the blade, polished and sharpened it, affixed the crossguard, hilt, and pommel…

He had also woven a complicated weave of enchantments into the silvery sword.

But his work wasn't over.

The most complicated part still remained.

Inhaling deeply, Sunny gritted his teeth and slowly rose to his feet. Grasping the hilt of the beautiful sword, he lifted it from the anvil and remained motionless for a few moments, gathering his strength.

Then, he stepped over the deep cracks covering the floor of the forge and slowly climbed the steps to the first floor of the Brilliant Emporium. Walking outside, he looked at the radiant sky of Godgrave and dismissed the Marvelous Mimic.

The brick cottage behind him disappeared.

The strain of having to encompass the forge during the creation of the sword had been too much for his Shadow. It had done its best to withstand the storm of dreadful forces unleashed by Sunny's hammer, but in the end, the Mimic still sustained considerable damage — now, it had to spend some time in the nourishing darkness of his soul to restore itself.

Walking across the emerald grass, Sunny passed through the jaws of the dead dragon and entered the Ivory Tower. Once inside, he ascended the stairs to the highest level of the great pagoda and approached the bed where Nephis was sleeping peacefully, surrounded by a softly glowing runic circle.

Sunny simply stood there for a few moments, studying her exquisitely beautiful face. It looked much softer than usual while Nephis slept,

devoid of the usual stoic severity… and much younger, too. Strangely vulnerable.

Finally, Sunny silently raised the silver sword above her head.

At that moment, his shadow rose from the ground, turning into a perfect copy of him.

While Sunny's original body held the sword above Nephis, his avatar summoned Weaver's Needle and grasped a black string woven out of shadow essence.

The physical vessel of the soulbound sword was complete, and so was its weave.

Now, all Sunny had to do was unite the two.

Holding his breath, Sunny reached forward with Weaver's Needle…

And pierced the shadow of the sword, threading a string of dark essence through it.

Then, he moved his hand and pierced Neph's shadow, as well, connecting them together.

Weaver's Needle — which had been bathed in the blood of the Demon of Fate — easily pierced that which was supposed to be intangible, stitching the shadow of the sword to the shadow of its wielder.

However, that simple action echoed in Sunny's soul like a cataclysm, making him stagger.

His hand had only traveled a little distance, but in the same distance, he had bent the world to his will.

Bending the laws of existence to one's will was the providence of gods, and Sunny was no god. So, there was a punishing backlash.

However…

He was a Transcendent Terror, and the flame of divinity burned in

his soul.

More importantly than that, his will and his spirit were tyrannical enough to lay claim to divine authority.

And so, even though sewing two shadows together was not supposed to be possible, Sunny made it possible.

Because that was his will, and because he was the Lord of Shadows.

A pained smile twisted his lips. Drawing a hoarse breath, Sunny sensed the spirit essence flow into his soul through the coils of the Soul Serpent and made the second stitch.

And then another, and another, and another…

And a thousand more.

Slowly, the shadow of the sword was being drawn closer and closer to Neph's shadow.

Inside the dream, Nephis flinched and looked up, as if sensing a sudden change in the tranquil peace of her Soul Sea.

Sunny inhaled deeply, struggling to keep the vast weave from coming undone under the pressure.

"What is happening?"

He struggled to speak, overwhelmed by the need to fight against the laws of existence to force his will onto them.

"It is… the last step."

Sunny tried to inhale.

"Nephis…"

She looked at him, concern apparent on her face.

Sunny tried to smile.

"Wake up, Nephis. This dream… should be over."

She frowned, as if only now remembering that they were inside a dream.

In the next moment, her expression changed subtly, and the world around them started to crumble.

But it was of no matter.

Because Sunny had already accomplished everything he wanted to accomplish here.

The two parts of the vast weave he had woven were being tied together.

They were becoming whole.

A shadow was deeply connected to one's soul, after all, and so were one's dreams.

So, by weaving an enchantment onto the dream of Neph's soul, and by sewing the shadow of the sword to her shadow, Sunny had managed to connect the two.

The weave of the physical vessel of the sword united with the weave of its dream counterpart seamlessly. It was a perfect fit… of course it was. Sunny had designed the two to be one whole, after all, and had executed his design flawlessly.

And as the two weaves connected, the vast tapestry flashed with blinding light… becoming visible to the naked eye for a short moment.

That was the last thing Nephis saw before waking up.

Opening her eyes in her chamber at the top of the Ivory Tower, she looked around dazedly, and then sat up.

The runic circle around her bed was slowly losing its ethereal glow.

Sunny was kneeling in front of the bed and resting his head on it, as pale as a ghost.

And there was something else…

Feeling a cold weight, Nephis looked down.

There, a dreadful, beautiful sword was resting easily in her hand.

As if meant to be held by it.

Chapter-2060: The Blessing

Nephis studied the beautiful longsword, then carefully raised her hand, trying to make as little noise as possible.

A moment later, she caught herself and realized how comical her action was. She was afraid to disturb the dreams of the man who was sleeping soundly with his head resting on her bed, his silky black hair scattered across the bedsheet. As if he was not the great and terrible Lord of Shadows, the sinister Saint who had crushed a dozen Transcendent champions of Song while laughing.

…But he was also Master Sunless, the sweet and gentle enchanter who had become her spellsmith, companion, and lover.

It was just that he had looked so drained there, in her dream. And that he looked so tired here in the real world, as well.

His porcelain skin was even paler than usual, and his lovely features were sunken and sharp, the labored breaths escaping quietly from between his lips.

She froze for a moment, surprised by the unexpected and unfamiliar feeling swelling in her chest.

Was it… tenderness?

Nephis was not an unfeeling monster, of course. She had experienced affection. Concern and worry about those who were dear to her, too — however, this subtle, but intense feeling was new.

It was both bitter and sweet… but mostly sweet.

And daunting.

She looked at him for a few moments too long, then slowly shifted

her gaze to the beautiful longsword.

The sword… was both familiar and strange. It looked very similar to her faithful and reliable companion, the Dream Blade — the weapon she had wielded on the Forgotten Shore, during the long and lonely journey to the Underworld, and into the horrors of the Second Nightmare. But it was also so much more.

It was much more striking, to start. The narrow and flawlessly straight blade seemed to shine in the splendid rays of sunlight, so bright that it was almost blinding. The ivory hilt felt cool and welcoming in her hand, as if it was meant to be there. The weight was perfect. The balance was beyond reproach.

The design of the sword was simple and elegant, with no needless embellishments or adornments. However, there was graceful beauty to the few stylistic elements it did possess… it was pure and true to its purpose, alien to all compromise and pretense, just as a killing implement was supposed to be.

There was also a chillingly lethal aura to it that was both cold and scorching, as if the sword possessed a presence of its own. The strangest part, however, was that the sword felt… warm and responsive to her touch, as if it was almost alive.

It was breathtaking.

Nephis found herself reluctant to look away from the resplendent blade. She also felt a rush of childish excitement, wanting to immediately jump off the bed and play with it… perform a few sets of training katas, that was, to get familiar with its feel and weight.

But she forced herself to stay still, and instead summoned the runes.

Her gaze swiftly focused on the new and unfamiliar string of them.

Holding her breath, she studied the runes:

Memory: Blessing.

Memory Rank: [???]

Memory Tier: [???]

Her gaze slid lower, to the runes comprising the description of the beautiful sword.

They read:

Memory Description: [Ascending the path, Changing Star said thus to the -unknown-:

"You have to light yourself on fire to reap the blessings of the fire. That was what my grandmother used to say, so that was what I did. I doused myself in oil, and set myself aflame. And I burned."

…The -unknown- listened.]

Nephis frowned.

These words… seemed to describe her self-immolation in the First Nightmare. However, she did not remember ever speaking them to anyone. She had shared the details of her trial with very few people — Cassie was probably the only one who knew most of it. But Nephis did not explain what had truly pushed her to take that terrible step even to her, and she definitely did not mention the parable of her grandmother.

Who was that -unknown- that the Spell seemed to think Nephis had bared her soul to?

She could not recall speaking to any Void Beings, and she had definitely never spoken to the Forgotten God. Neither would she have had the reason to pour her heart out to a stranger.

It was strange, very strange.

And it made her feel strange, as well. As if there was an empty void in her heart, echoing with a hollow, dull pain.

Gripping the hilt of the Blessing tighter, Nephis looked back to the runes.

Usually, there would not have been anything after the description of

a Memory, but this time, there was an additional string.

Memory Enchantments: [Shadowbound Relic].

As she concentrated on it, several new runes shimmered into existence.

[Bind the relic?]

Nephis hesitated for a few moments.

Her heartbeat accelerated suddenly, and a soft smile found its way onto her face.

She glanced at Sunny, who was still sleeping peacefully.

He had promised to forge her a blade to slay the gods…

And it seemed like he had fulfilled that promise.

The tender feeling of thankfulness she experienced was more powerful than she had expected, too.

Troubled, Nephis looked away and nodded.

"Yes."

The beautiful longsword seemed to ring, as if answering her call…

And flashed with blinding radiance, turning into a ray of pure light. That light was then absorbed into her hand, illuminating her body from within… fusing with her body and soul.

Becoming a part of her.

The Spell whispered into her ear, its voice strangely quiet:

[Your Memory has been destroyed.]

[...You have received an Attribute.]

***

"Yes."

Sunny stirred, not quite asleep, but not quite awake yet, either.

He felt tired… exhausted, really. He was also truly and utterly out cold, which meant that all his incarnations had fallen into a deep slumber. The Lord of Shadows was sleeping on his throne — of course, he was. After all, he had been riding Nightmare on a journey across dreams not too long ago. Rain's teacher was asleep, as well, hidden safely in her shadow.

That guy had to wake up quickly, though, lest something unexpected or undesirable happened.

As for the original body…

'When did I pass out, anyway?'

Before Sunny could will himself awake, a blinding flash suddenly shone through his eyelids. Opening his eyes with a start, he just managed to catch a glimpse of a ray of pure white light entering Neph's body.

She was illuminated from within for a moment, as if there was a literal star burning in her chest. Then, the radiance dimmed, and he could see her lovely features clearly once again.

Neph had a distant expression on her face, tilting her head a little. It was as if she was listening to something happening inside her soul.

The sword he had forged was nowhere to be seen…

It took Sunny a few moments to realize the implication.

His eyes widened.

Jerking upright, he stared at her and asked hurriedly:

"Did it work?"

Sunny had collapsed from exhaustion immediately after finishing sewing the shadow of the sword and Neph's shadow together, so he

did not even have the chance to study the result.

Had his binding held?

Did the Spell do what it was supposed to and oversee the process?

And not quite as importantly, and just as curiously…

How had it named the new Memory? What description had it given it?

Usually, Sunny named and described the Memories he crafted personally. But reforging the Dream Blade was different — after all, he had never taken it from Neph's soul. It had always remained a Memory belonging to a carrier of the Nightmare Spell, and therefore, one under the Spell's purview. That was the whole point.

Nephis lingered for a moment, then shifted and looked at him with a faint smile.

With that, she outstretched her hand. It shone with a soft radiance, and a ray of radiant light shot from it, instantly taking the form of a beautiful longsword.

The sunlight reflected on its silvery blade, making the room feel brighter.

Sunny let out a relieved sigh.

That was not all, though…

A moment later, the longsword ignited with incandescent light, making its presence feel even more daunting… overwhelming, even. Nephis must have used her Aspect to augment it.

Infused with soul flame, the silver blade seemed like a narrow line of pristine whiteness, a rift in the fabric of reality that cut the world in half. It was so pure and bright that he struggled to discern if the weapon Nephis was holding was still made from steel, or had simply turned into a sharp, narrow plain of radiant flame.

Then, the shape of the sword suddenly rippled, and it turned into a

stream of liquid fire… or incandescent metal, perhaps. That stream flowed down Neph's right arm, wrapping around it and turning into a silver bracelet.

She studied it with a curious expression, then looked back at Sunny and beamed with a brilliant smile.

"Yes. It worked."

The stoic, unflappable Changing Star…

Was just like an excited girl who had received a shiny new toy.

Looking at her, Sunny couldn't help but smile, as well.

'...I should forge her soulbound relics more often.'

Chapter-2061: Soul Sword

Not too long after both of them woke up, Sunny found himself sitting on the stone floor, leaning on Neph's bed… while she danced with the Blessing.

Honestly, he was feeling a little neglected. The damned sword seemed to have stolen all her attention. Still, he had gotten the opportunity to watch Neph's lithe body move through the fluid motions of a beautiful sword dance, instead…

That, at least, was a consolation.

Of course, she was not really dancing — she was performing swift sequences of attacks and defensive movements to get acquainted with the soul sword. However, her style had always been graceful and fluid, so she might as well have been.

Her white tunic flew and fluttered with every swift motion, contouring the supple lines of her slender body, and her silver hair shone beautifully in the radiant sunlight. The lustrous blade was like a splendid haze, dancing alongside her.

It was quite a lovely view.

Sunny was still utterly drained and exhausted after forging the Blessing. It was hard to keep track of time in Godgrave, but the process had lasted many days, testing the limits of his physical and mental endurance both. So, for now, he allowed himself to relax and enjoy the sight.

His thoughts drifted lazily to what he had learned about the silver longsword.

Nephis had given him an opportunity to study the Blessing — impatient to try it out as she might have been — before pulling the

sword out of his hands. She had also shared most of the information provided to her by the runes.

All except for the description… she seemed strangely reluctant to talk about that part of it.

In any case, Sunny had learned enough.

Now that the Blessing had been Bound to Nephis and became an Attribute, a literal part of her being, it was not a Memory anymore. Therefore, Sunny could not see its weave… only he could, somewhat, due to a special trait of one of the enchantments he had woven.

Having personally turned the Dawn Shard into the Crown of Dawn — a Supreme Memory of immense power — he did not wish to lose the potential synergy between his two great creations. So, he made sure that the Blessing retained some traits of a Memory while becoming an Attribute, and could thus be augmented by Neph's crown.

So, he was able to confirm that the Spell had indeed improved upon his design, bringing its various elements together like a binding agent… much like his blood had done to the ingredients of the blessed alloy.

He was going to need some time to truly understand what changes it had made, but Sunny had no doubt. He would be able to master the crafting of soulbound Memories — no, shadowbound Memories — before too long.

The difference between the two was subtle, and not entirely important. In the end, Sunny did not manage to repeat what Nether had done — instead, he invented his own way of achieving the same result.

What mattered was that the Binding ended in success. One of the seven enchantments that the Blessing possessed was named accordingly, [Bound] — functionally the same as the trait of his Mantle. It made the silver longsword equal in Rank and Class to the soul of its wielder, meaning that at the moment, the Blessing was akin to a Transcendent Memory of the Seventh Tier.

Apart from being [Bound], it possessed two core and four auxiliary enchantments.

The fundamental enchantment of the silver longsword shared the name with the original blade that served as its source — the Dream Blade… a fitting name for a weapon meant to be wielded by a Dreamspawn, and earned by her for slaying herself to destroy a dream in the depths of a Nightmare.

The [Dream Blade] enchantment governed the form of the Blessing. Just like the Mantle possessed two forms — one passive, one active — so did the fiery sword. In its dormant state, the Blessing slumbered in Neph's soul and bestowed several boons upon her.

Among them were increased resistance against soul attacks — now drastically more powerful than the original enchantment of the Dream Blade — as well as an increased rate of both soul essence replenishment and spirit essence absorption.

That last one… was curious. Sunny was not entirely sure how it functioned, but he had an idea. Neph's source element was the longing she inspired in other people, and therefore, the more people were moved by her, the more plentiful the currents of her spirit essence grew. The [Dream Blade] obviously did not increase the number of those who had awoken to a deep yearning because of Nephis…

But if Sunny's guess was correct, it did allow her to draw power from their dreams. In other words, the people ensnared by the web of her nascent Domain were adding to the stream of spirit essence even when they slept.

Which was strange and astonishing simply due to the fact that Sunny had neither woven such an enchantment, nor knew how to weave it.

Either the Spell added such a trait to the [Dream Blade] enchantment… or the Blessing itself did, already realizing the potential to learn Sunny had imbued it with.

In either case, it was a welcome surprise. One could never have enough essence, and this ability would only grow more powerful

once Nephis became Supreme and fully manifested her Domain, turning a stream of spirit essence into a raging torrent.

For now, though, it was merely a pleasant bonus.

Needless to say, the Blessing was quite like the Mantle as far as augmenting it went, too. Since it was a part of Nephis, augmenting her body meant augmenting the Blessing, as well; therefore, all these traits would only grow stronger and more pronounced for as long as she was wreathed in the beautiful radiance of the soul flame.

That was true for the dormant form of the Blessing, and for its awakened form, as well.

Once the silver blade awoke, naturally, it assumed the shape of a tangible sword.

Wielding the sword, Nephis lost the benefits of having it slumbering in her soul. However, she gained access to its remaining five enchantments, instead.

That concluded the effects of the first of the two core traits of the Blessing.

The four auxiliary enchantments were all formidable in their own regard, too.

They were [Flame Conduit], [Purifying Light], [Change]... and [Ruin].

Chapter-2062: Sacrificial Blade

[Flame Conduit] was perhaps one of the most straightforward enchantments of the Blessing, as well as one of the most consistently impactful. Although other traits of the soul sword were more astounding, Sunny was secretly proud of this one the most.

It had two functions. One allowed the Blessing to serve as a fulcrum for Neph's flames, channeling them in a more compressed and focused manner. In other words, she could use the Blessing to control fire more easily or produce jets of flame — rays of light, maybe — that were narrow and sharp enough to slice apart the most durable of tangible objects.

This was especially useful because these rays had much greater length and reach than the blade of the sword itself. Since Sunny and Nephis often faced enemies of a much greater size than their own, such an ability was exceedingly convenient to possess on the battlefield.

The second function was more subtle, but had been infinitely more difficult to weave into existence. It drew upon the nature of the blessed alloy and the innate affinity of the soul sword to Neph's soul flame, increasing the efficiency of her Dormant Ability when applied to the Blessing.

Simply put, it made the result of augmenting the silver longsword greater without affecting the potency of the Ability itself. The increase was not too drastic, perhaps adding a few tenths to the overall strength of enhancement… for now, at least. Sunny hoped that as the Blessing grew more powerful, this function of the [Flame Conduit] would evolve further, as well.

Needless to say, such an enhancement was a real boon, especially because it did not demand an additional cost to be paid. Even though it did not double the efficacy of the soul flame augmentation, it still

increased it by a considerable amount… and if Nephis poured more of her flame onto the soul sword, the effects would only mount.

Sunny was quite satisfied with himself greatly for achieving this feat. That pattern of the overall spellweave had been incredibly intricate and complicated, having demanded a similarly stunning amount of effort to design.

It would serve Nephis well in the future, no doubt.

The [Purifying Light], in comparison… was not something he could take full credit for. It was another enchantment that differed from his original design.

The [Purifying Light] had been meant to be a version of the [Brilliant Will] — the enchantment of the Undying Chain that had allowed his long-lost armor to grow more durable in relation to the presence of divinity contained within its master's soul. Similarly, Sunny had wanted to make the power of the Blessing grow if the flames of divinity burned in its wielder.

And it had worked… in a sense. The power of the silver sword was now indeed connected to the flames of Neph's soul, just not in the way he had intended.

The enchantment did not depend on the quality of the [Flame of Divinity]. Instead, it depended on the quality of Neph's own flame… the soul flame. And the boon it granted the Blessing was not a blanket enhancement, but rather quite a specialized one.

The soul sword would grow stronger and more deadly when wielded against creatures who had succumbed to Corruption, as if its light was antithetical to the appalling darkness dwelling within their souls.

Purifying it… in a quite final manner.

While wielding the Blessing, Nephis would not only be immune to Corruption due to her [Longing] Ability, but also especially dominant in slaying Nightmare Creatures.

Which was beyond amazing in the Age of the Nightmare Spell, of course, albeit not so much for their current predicament.

The [Change] was rather simple when compared to the other two auxiliary enchantments… or simply familiar, perhaps. It allowed the Blessing to change both shape and form.

Nephis was quite conservative in her choice of weapons, mostly preferring to wield a versatile longsword. However, that did not mean that there were no situations when something else could suit the situation better — the [Change] allowed the soul sword to become a soul spear, for example, or even an unassuming bracelet… not that the latter had any practical use.

However, there was another quality to the [Change]. It also allowed the Blessing to shift between states — be it steel, liquid metal, compressed flame, or even pure light. Nephis would have to explore the ramifications of that ability herself and find proper uses for each of the states, but its most important boon was quite obvious.

It was that the Blessing could merge with her Transcendent form in its flaming and radiant states, thus imbuing her with its traits and enchantments — similar to how Serpent could fuse with Shadow Shells Sunny created to grant them its.

This gave Nephis a choice on how to use the Blessing while Transformed — whether to wield it in her hand, or simply make it a part of her hand, as well as of her entire radiant body.

Finally, the last of the four auxiliary traits was [Ruin]. That one… the soul sword seemed to have inherited from the black arrow Sunny had sacrificed to create the blessed alloy.

Bearing a breath of the Shadow Realm and the echo of the killing intent of its mysterious inhabitant, the Blessing had attained a death will of its own. It was very much like the [Slaying Blade] Ability of the Soul Serpent, making the soul sword more lethal to those beings who were able to bend the world to their will… albeit much weaker.

Most of it would still depend on Neph's own murderous will, of course, but the sword itself was going to enhance her lethality. Sunny was not worried about the quality of her killing intent, really, considering that Nephis had been preaching murder from the days they were both teenagers. But every little bit helped, not that the

[Ruin] was that little of a boon.

Then... there was the second of the two core enchantments of the Blessing, as well.

The one that, as Sunny suspected, had given the soul sword its name.

It was the [Blessing of the Fire].

This one, he had designed himself in its entirety. And although it was not as consistently useful as the [Flame Conduit], at the end of the day, it was utterly and undeniably more vital.

Because it was an enchantment meant to tip the scales of those dire battles where everything that could go wrong went wrong, and Nephis was pushed to her very limit. The battles against the truly powerful foes… the ones that mattered the most.

Its function was simple.

It increased the power and lethality of the Blessing in direct proportion to how heavily Neph's soul was damaged.

That went well with the essence of her Transcendent Battle Art, of course, and would be useful against enemies capable of wounding and destroying the souls of living beings.

But fundamentally, the [Blessing of the Fire] was aimed at something else.

It was aimed at Nephis herself, and her ability to burn her soul in order to ignite with incredible power. Like she had done in Twilight, and while escaping from the clutches of Condemnation as well.

Neph's self-sacrificial act of igniting her soul was a form of dealing direct damage to it, too.

So, if she ever had to mutilate her own soul severely — meaning that she had faced a truly overwhelming enemy — the sword would become exponentially more powerful the worse the state of her soul became.

If she sacrificed one soul core… two, three, six of them… it would grow stronger and stronger, until its power reached a limit that even Sunny was afraid to imagine.

And that was it, the sword he had created.

A beautiful sword.

A deadly sword…

A sword that would one day cut the fabric of the Nightmare Spell, perhaps.

And would cut down the Sovereigns much sooner.

Sunny sighed.

It was worth the effort.

Chapter-2063: Total War

The war raged on, spreading like a cancer in all directions.

The main camp of the Sword Army was becoming more and more desolate. Every day, new troops were leaving it to head west, where they were meant to participate in the inevitable and dreadful siege of the Crossing Strongholds. Some were being sent to garrison the new extermination outposts as the remains of the Breastbone Reach fell to the might of the King of Swords, instead…

However, the city-like camp was not being completely abandoned — a considerable force was being left behind to guard it. After all, it was still the most important logistical hub for the Sword Army, both receiving the supply caravans climbing the left arm of the dead deity and housing the Dream Gate.

Sunny and Nephis spent the last few blissful days together, watching the once-lively avenues of the warcamp grow silent and waiting for the order that would call her back to the frontline. Without having to say anything, they both seemed in a hurry to enjoy each other's company while there still was time…

The future was unclear, and there was nothing like the promise of death to make one's heart beat faster, and make them want to voraciously relish life.

But to their surprise, the inevitable parting never came.

Instead, the King's order was delivered by Saint Tyris personally. He did not simply command Nephis to return — he commanded her to bring the Ivory Island with her, intending to turn it into the cornerstone of the future siege.

So, they released its seven anchors and started the slow journey to the Western Collarbone Plain, at the precipice of which the decisive

battles of the war were going to take place.

As they traveled across Godgrave on the flying island, blood was being spilled.

The Sword Army was pursuing the forces of Song across the northern parts of the Breastbone Reach, engaging in frequent skirmishes and battling the spreading scarlet infestation.

Somewhere else, the conquest expeditions were braving the darkest parts of Godgrave.

Far in the south, Mordret and Morgan were still locked in a fratricidal battle for control over Bastion.

Worst of all…

The tacit agreement made by both Domains to keep the war out of the waking world had finally collapsed, and the cradle of humanity became submerged in a wave of terror and violence.

The streets of NQSC — and other human cities in the waking world — had never been peaceful, exactly. People had always lived in the oppressive fear of Nightmare Gates and perished Sleepers going rampant after turning into abominations. These threats had only grown more dire in recent years… and there was the Skinwalker, as well.

But now, the violence was being perpetrated by the forces of humanity itself, not the Nightmare Creatures.

There were explosions thundering in the silence of the night, charred remains of destroyed PTVs burning on the roads, and sporadic firefights happening in broad daylight from time to time. The direct collateral damage was not high, but these bloody confrontations between the two great Domains was negatively affecting every facet of humanity, weakening its ability to defend itself.

The terrible losses suffered by the House of Night alone had dealt enormous damage to the logistical connection between the four Quadrants, resulting in temporary food shortages and countless other complications. Even though the government had absorbed the

remaining Nightwalkers into its ranks, the scale of the navigation across the ocean was severely reduced.

And now, more and more problems were creeping up. While the two Domains battled against each other, there were too many crises to solve, and not enough people to solve them. There were not enough soldiers to contain the ever-increasing amount of Nightmare Gates in time, watch over the Aspirants while they challenged the First Nightmare, and keep the order on the streets.

The waking world was slowly, steadily, and inevitably sliding into chaos.

The world seemed to be ending... ending more swiftly than it had been before, at least.

If there was one mercy to the situation, it was that most of the combatants participating in the skirmishes and sabotage in the waking world were mundane agents of the royal clans, not Awakened warriors. Those were mostly needed on the frontline in Godgrave or human settlements in the Dream Realm.

Still, conventional weapons were just as destructive when wielded against mundane people and infrastructure, so the damage wasn't insignificant.

Worse still…

The agents of Song were not shy when retaliating against the government forces, seeing them as collaborators of the Sword Domain. Government Saints were defending Bastion, after all… the servants of the Queen did not go out of their way to attack the government soldiers, but did not hesitate to act against those of them who became an obstacle either.

Which, not at all unexpectedly, only pushed the government deeper into the embrace of the Sword Domain. As a result, the forces of Song were being pushed back both in the Dream Realm and in the waking world, losing ground with each day.

The Song compound in NQSC still stood, protecting the approach to

the Dream Gate, but there were already many breaches in its scorched walls.

Even the Awakened Academy was not spared, a section of its defensive barrier crumbling for the first time since being built decades earlier.

It was appalling. It was utter madness.

…It was war.

And as if responding to the madness of the human war, the world itself seemed to start coming undone under the pressure.

The already rapid increase in the number of the Nightmare Gates opening across the territories held by humanity had grown even more. A flood of abominations flowed into the waking world, threatening to overwhelm its already strained defenses. More people were succumbing to the Spell, and therefore more Sleepers were losing their lives while challenging its first trial.

The process was gradual, and the situation worsened one small step at a time. People of the modern era were well-accustomed to hardships and calamities, and distracted by the tectonic changes caused by the Great Domain War, as well. So, like a frog being boiled in the slowly heating pan, they were slow to notice that the dire reality surrounding them was dreadful even beyond the terrible norm.

Still, even they were slowly growing aware of how much worse it was than it had ever been… with no indicator that things would eventually grow better, as they had always done before.

In that tense and heavy atmosphere, the war in Godgrave was swiftly approaching its final stage.

Chapter-2064: Fragments of War (1)

"T—tamar!"

Rain desperately dashed back, trying to avoid the claws of an appalling beast that had lunged at her from the underbrush. All around her, the battered remains of the centuria were besieged by the rabid Nightmare Creatures. The world was painted in the shades of scarlet, and her feet were drowning in the soft moss.

The main body of the Song Army was far ahead, having most likely already reached the Crossing Stronghold. However, many small squads had been sent back to slow down the vanguard forces of the Sword Domain and make them pay dearly for every step they took.

There were traps, ambushes, and countless skirmishes being fought under the indifferent grey sky of Godgrave. Most importantly of all…

The extermination outposts had been destroyed days ago, and now, the scarlet jungle was spreading feverishly across the weathered surface of the sun-bleached bone once again.

Having accomplished their missions, the rearguard forces of the Song Army had to flee north — unfortunately, they had to brave the abominable jungle themselves in order to escape.

Tamar's soldiers were among those unfortunate souls who had been ordered to stay back. They ambushed the scouts of the Sword Army in the charred ruins of a destroyed outpost, fought a bloody skirmish, and then retreated before the enemy reinforcements could arrive.

They had lost many good men in the battle against the warriors of the Sword Domain… but they had lost many more to the hungry jungle on the way north.

After several long months of the terrible war, no more than half of the soldiers remained alive.

'Damn it…'

Rain slid on the scarlet moss, blocked the beasts's jaws with her black tachi, and used the abomination's own momentum to throw it to the ground.

It was a perfect moment to deliver a fatal blow — the only moment she would receive, perhaps. The black tachi was positioned perfectly to fall down and end the creature's life. But although Rain's muscles remembered the motions of thrusting the tachi into the beast's neck with painful clarity, and her mind willed it, her hands did not move.

The moment had come and passed. Rain's eyes widened.

The beast twisted, jumped to its feet, and lunged at her once again.

'Damn it!'

Rain had no choice but to retreat once again. This time, the claws of the abomination brushed against her side, failing to cut the black lusterless leather of her light armor, but still sending a sharp jolt of pain through her body. There would be angry black bruises covering her ivory skin come morning…

She was in a terrible position.

The abomination was in a murderous frenzy, lusting to kill Rain — but Rain could not do the same.

Even if there was an opportunity, her limbs simply refused to move.

She was still trying to get used to her Flaw. But as things were going currently… there was a high possibility that Rain would never get the chance to come to terms with it.

Because she was going to die right now, today!

She had already done all she could to debilitate and immobilize the Nightmare Creature, but subduing a powerful enemy was much

harder than simply killing them. At close distance, with no time to think, let alone summon Memories and come up with cunning plans, all Rain could do was retreat, sustain wound after wound, and hope that someone would rescue her.

The beast was bleeding, its limbs cut deeply by the blade of her sword, but that did not seem to slow it down one bit.

Instead, it had only grown more enraged.

'Curse it!'

Rain looked around frantically, hoping to see that one of her comrades was close enough and in a position to assist her. But it was all for naught — everyone had their own deadly threats to deal with, having walked into the breeding ground of an especially nasty kind of abominations.

Actually, in a different situation, she would have been full of curiosity… where were all these Nightmare Creatures coming from? Every time the scarlet jungle returned to the surface after being burned to ash, it was flooded with all kinds of abominable fauna in a matter of hours. The beasts would then proceed to devour each other and rapidly grow stronger.

But how did they come to be? What gave birth to them?

Were they like the moss, the vines, and the trees, growing from seeds? Were they born from the scarlet pollen or clouds of deadly spores? Were they the offspring of the ancient Nightmare Creatures that dwelled in the Hollows, perhaps, brought to the surface by the slithering vines?

Did they simply materialize out of thin air, or crawl out of the ash?

Rain did not know, and nobody else knew, either. Godgrave still held countless mysteries, and this was one of them.

More importantly…

She had to find a way to survive.

Dashing back, she avoided another of the beast's attacks, gritted her teeth, and then allowed her black tachi to turn back into a snake tattoo.

Then, Rain faced the lumbering abominations with bare hands.

Tearing the scarlet moss with its claws, the Nightmare Creature lunged forward, its maw opening wide, as if to bite her in two.

For a moment, everything seemed to grow still… except for Rain's shadow, which stirred slightly on the ground.

Then, at the last moment, she sidestepped to avoid the maw of the frenzied beast. At the same time, her hands moved, untying the black sash from her waist.

Rain dodged the enraged abomination like a graceful toreador and looped the beautiful silk sash around its neck.

Then, allowing the momentum of the abomination's charge to carry her forward, she poured her essence into the [In Case of Emergency] and activated its single enchantment.

Originally, that enchantment had been meant to save her from turning to ash in case the Cloudveil broke unexpectedly, flooding Godgrave with incinerating white light. It was supposed to fix the wearer of the black sash in space, making them completely still.

But currently, it wasn't Rain who was wearing the sash. Since it was wrapped around the abomination, for all intents and purposes, it was the abomination who was wearing it.

So, when the enchantment of the [In Case of Emergency] activated, it was the abomination that was frozen in place, coming to a sudden halt.

Rain staggered and hung on the beast's neck, still gripping the black sash tightly.

The enchantment had been… calibrated?... to work on an Awakened being of approximately her weight. However, currently, she was forcefully immobilizing a much heavier creature of a higher Rank.

Therefore, her soul essence was dwindling with terrible speed.

"Tamar!"

She had maybe half a dozen seconds left…

Luckily, just a few moments later, a swift figure leaped from somewhere above and landed near Rain in a whirlwind of steel. The brutish zweihander fell, biting into the neck of the abomination — it did not quite manage to behead it in one strike, but the wound was deep enough to reveal the white spine of the frozen creature.

Tamar balanced herself in one fluid motion, then delivered a second strike, cleanly cutting the abomination's head off.

Glancing at Rain, she let out a hoarse breath, lingered for a moment, and then asked neutrally:

"You called?"

Chapter-2065: Fragments of War (2)

Eventually, the battle was over. The Nightmare Creatures had been eliminated, and the tired soldiers sprawled on the ground, breathing heavily.

Rain was sitting on the scarlet moss, as well, cradling her bruised side with a somber expression. The sweltering heat of Godgrave was especially suffocating today, so she summoned the Green Canteen and poured cool water over her head.

'...I won't survive like that.'

She had thought that dealing with her Flaw was possible… and it was, most likely. However, learning how to deal with it required time, which was hard to come by during a war, and tools that she lacked.

Rain had managed so far with Tamar's help, but how long could it last?

Shifting her gaze, she looked at her shadow.

Her brother was right there. His offer still stood. If she so wished, she could desert the Song Army at any moment and be whisked away to safety.

Leaving her comrades — and her principles — behind.

Looking away from the shadow, Rain studied her fellow soldiers.

'Fourty, fourty-one…'

There were forty-two of them left. Less than half of the initial

number… some had perished during the conquest of the Collarbone Citadel, some while subjugating the wild reaches of the Breastbone Reach. Many fell during the Battle of Godheart, and finally, many more died during the retreat north.

Most of the forty-two Awakened had suffered minor wounds, while some were wounded severely. There had been two healers in the centuria before, but now, there was only Fleur. Her essence, sadly, wasn't endless.

Mercifully — or perhaps cruelly — there were relatively few people who were wounded heavily enough to require her immediate treatment. That was because the Nightmare Creatures dwelling in the jungle were too powerful, and most people who became their prey simply died.

It was a terrible thing, but also somewhat fortunate for these tired soldiers — after all, they were pursued by the members of the Sword Army. Each person who could not march on their own would slow the rest down.

Just as Rain considered this matter, Tamar's voice resounded across the recent battlefield.

"Alright… you have ten minutes to rest! We will continue north after that."

Her order was not unexpected. It was unwise to remain in the vicinity of the battlefield, where the scent of blood could attract swarms of abominable scavengers. There was also the Sword Army to worry about, so they had no time to tarry.

Everyone understood that. And yet, many dark gazes were aimed at Tamar, the faces of most soldiers turning resentful.

It couldn't be helped.

The warriors of the Song Army were still reeling from the Battle of Godheart. Even before that, their morale had been harmed grievously by the ghastly horrors of Godgrave — a literal Death Zone where no human was supposed to exist. And things were only turning harder

now.

They were tired, rattled, and afraid.

How could they not feel resentful when the empty space left by their fallen comrades was so obvious as to almost be palpable?

Therefore, the soldiers had little warmth left in their hearts for the leadership of the Song Army at the moment. And since Tamar was the only officer here, she had to receive the brunt of these negative emotions.

Her situation was even worse than that of other officers, most likely, because she was a young Awakened doing the job meant for a seasoned Master. It did not matter how competent she was or how deadly of a fighter — all that mattered was that soldiers were dying, and she was a convenient target to place blame.

Looking at Tamar, the soldiers, who had followed her with fervor just recently, could not help but wonder now… how many of them would have been alive if there was an Ascended leading them instead of this Legacy youth?

The more tired and afraid they were, the more dejected they became.

The same was probably true for how they felt about the higher officers of the Song Army.

Perhaps even the Queen herself.

…Tamar, meanwhile, did not seem to pay the resentful gazes any attention. Walking over to Rain, she sat on the ground and nodded at the Green Canteen.

"Give me that."

Receiving the canteen, she drank the cool water greedily.

Exactly ten minutes later, the battered troop left the scene of the battle, not even bothering to harvest soul shards from of the bodies of the Nightmare Creatures.

Time was too short.

They hurried north without making any stops. From time to time, a stray abomination would wander into their path, forcing the soldiers to fight. Luckily, there were no more battles as sudden and dire as that last one had been, so Rain did not have to engage in melee.

She was much safer, as well as much more effective, with a bow in her hands.

[Heavy Burden], [Outskirts at Noon], and [Don't Cut Yourself] — the three arrows crafted for her by Sunny — were far more excellent at slowing down and immobilizing the enemy than her deadly sword. Especially with how unerring Rain's aim was. Once a Nightmare Creature was hit by one of them, it was much easier for other soldiers to finish it off.

So, even though she was unable to kill anything anymore, she was still contributing plenty.

Most of the soldiers did not even notice that the way Rain fought had changed. Only Ray and Fleur were attentive enough to know that something about her was different.

"Are you… alright? Your aim is strangely off today."

She simply forced out a smile.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just exploring what my new Memories can do."

Ray seemed unconvinced, but nodded and left her alone in the end.

They braved the northernmost tip of the Breastbone Reach, fighting the many perils of the scarlet jungle on the way.

There were several more skirmishes, but luckily enough, the veil of clouds above them broke after a few hours. A vast swathe of the jungle was annihilated, and once the clouds repaired themselves, Rain and her companions continued on their way north.

After two more days of marching… they finally reached one of the two Crossing Strongholds.

Chapter-2066: Fragments of War (3)

Godgrave was a strange land. Although it was vast like a continent, to the point that it was easy to forget its true nature while traversing the vast plains of white bone, the titanic skeleton was just that — the remains of an inconceivable giant.

As such, its topography was strange and alien at times. The same was true to the points where the colossal breastbone connected to the immense collarbones. There was no smooth transition from one to another — instead, the ground simply sloped downward, rolling into a vast and seemingly bottomless chasm.

Of course, it was possible to descend into the darkness, reach the distant bottom, and climb back to the surface on the other side, then completing the crossing. But transporting entire armies in this manner was not feasible… not to mention that the lower part of the chasm was covered in a thick layer of soft ash, and all kinds of horrors could be hiding under its surface.

So, the Song Army had constructed fortified bridges at the two points where the chasm was the narrowest, and built mighty strongholds to guard them.

The greater stronghold was located at the point where Breastbone Reach connected to Western Collarbone Plain directly. The other was technically a chain of two lesser strongholds at both ends of the Western First Rib.

Both of the Crossing Strongholds had been built to withstand terrible sieges, so taking them by force was a daunting task.

The Song Army also fully intended to destroy the bridges before the enemy arrived…

But they had not destroyed them yet, because there were still Song soldiers trickling into the strongholds after spilling blood to slow down the approaching Sword Army.

The Greater Crossing Stronghold made for an impressive sight. It was hard to deliver building materials to Godgrave, so it was mostly built from local materials — namely, lumber scavenged from the ancient jungle of the Hollows.

The mystical wood was tougher than any mundane alloy could ever be, to the point that it sometimes seemed nearly indestructible. Sadly, it had an apparent weakness — it burned all too well, which made it vulnerable to fire attacks. Even if Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan was not fighting on the enemy side, this vulnerability could prove fatal.

So, there was an additional layer of protection atop the mystical lumber — the hides of countless abominations were stretched over the entire fortress, serving as a shield against flame.

Much of it had belonged to the Great Demon who the Queen had slain immediately after descending to Godgrave. The bones of the gargantuan ape, meanwhile, had served to reinforce the structure of the fortress wall and of its gates.

The fortress built from the bones of a Great Demon oversaw the entrance to the bridge, while a tall wall stretched in both directions for many kilometers, serving as a barrier for any being that could try climbing out of the dark chasm.

The bridge itself was long and wide, built to accommodate a great army of countless Awakened, transformed Saints, and abominable thralls of Beastmaster.

The battered remains of Tamar's centuria were currently crossing it, having finally reached safety.

Two people were standing on the protruding bastion above the gates of the stronghold, looking down at their tiny figures from great height.

One of them was Seishan, the Lost Princess of Song, while the other was her sister, Beastmaster.

Beastmaster was looking down with a somber expression on her enchanting face. The scar marring her beautiful features seemed especially sacrilegious in the bright light of the overcast sky.

She sighed.

"These ones are yours, aren't they? They should be one of the last."

Seishan nodded.

"Yes. It's the daughter of the Saint of Sorrow and her soldiers… I am glad that she returned alive. She is a good kid."

Beastmaster slowly shook her head.

"How long will she remain alive, though? At this point, is it even possible for us to win?"

Seishan looked at her with a hint of amusement.

"What are you talking about? Of course, it is possible."

She leaned on the parapet of the rampart and studied the horizon.

"Sure, the situation does not look good. We only have one Citadel while Anvil has two… perhaps three. Most of Godgrave is under his control now, and his soldiers are stronger. No one seems to be able to deal with Changing Star or the Lord of Shadows, either, which makes our superior number of Saints pointless."

Beastmaster smiled crookedly.

"You… really know how to lighten the mood, Shan."

Seishan smiled, as well.

"But war is unpredictable. It can turn on a dime."

She pointed to the dark chasm and the mighty wall of the fortress.

"And this… is our dime."

Beastmaster grimaced.

"You think we can break the Sword Army with this fortress?"

Seishan shook her head.

"No… but we can make the Sword Army break itself against this fortress."

Then, a sudden smile illuminated her graceful face.

"I know a thing or two about castles, you know."

Beastmaster chuckled. Seishan remained silent for a few moments, and then added calmly:

"A direct siege can be disastrous for the attacking side, if things go wrong. And that is what the King of Swords will do — he will throw his soldiers at the walls of this fortress without holding anything back. Because time is not on his side. If he waits for too long, he will lose Bastion, and his power will be severely diminished."

She shook her head.

"After all, the outcome of this war will not be decided by the battles of mortals. It will be decided by the battle between the King of Swords and our mother. Everything we do is ultimately to give our Supreme a better chance at victory."

Beastmaster did not respond for a while.

Eventually, though, she said quietly:

"I am not sure if you are overconfident or simply being a contrarian, but things are way worse than that. Look behind you… the soldiers are tired and terrified. The morale is low, and it will continue to plummet as the siege drags on. Whatever loyalty they have will dwindle, until, in the end, the Song Army army will break instead. No matter how great our fortress is, you can't win a siege with a broken army, sister.. So, time isn't on our side either."

Seishan remained silent.

Some time passed, and a few more battered groups of soldiers crossed the bridge.

She looked at Beastmaster somberly.

"...It's not like we have a choice, though, do we?"

Her words hung in the air, full of many meanings.

Then, Seishan turned away and sighed.

"That should be the last of them. We must blow up the bridge now."

Soon, there was a thunderous explosion, and the great bridge connecting Collarbone Plain to Breastbone Reach shuddered. With a groaning sound, its central section collapsed into the darkness. Wreathed in a cloud of dust, debris rained down, and wisps of ash rose from below.

The Greater Crossing Stronghold was ready for battle.

Chapter-2067: Fragments of War (4)

Far to the south, the winds howled in the deep canyons that broke the surface of a sloping plain. Here on the femur of the dead deity, the ancient bone was covered in cracks, as if something had shattered it countless years ago.

However, there were no scarlet vines protruding from the cracks, and no jungle covering the slopes of the titanic femur. The entire place was dead and silent, bathed in the scorching radiance of the cloudy sky.

The femur stretched all the way down to the surface of the Sea of Ash, where even the Lord of Shadows did not dare step foot. It was unclear whether the tibia and fibula of the dead god were missing or simply buried in ash — no human had ever made it to the ground before, and no one was mad enough to try and find out the truth.

Currently, a battered troop of warriors was making its way across the desolate expanse of white bone, suffering in the unbearable heat. There were three Saints among them, commanding a force comprised of Ascended Knights — those who were still alive, of course. Many had perished on the way.

Sir Gilead, the Summer Knight, was walking at the head of the column. His lustrous armor was covered in dust and had lost its sheen, and his usually clean-shaven face was now covered by a short beard. His skin had turned darker with tan, and his fiercely blue eyes were squinting against the merciless radiance of the grey sky.

Raising a hand, he wiped the sweat off his brow and lingered for a moment, listening to the howling wind.

His expression darkened.

The wind had grown stronger, bringing with it a refreshing coolness. The tired knights seemed invigorated by its touch, their movements becoming livelier.

However, the Saints looked at each other somberly.

One of them — a man wearing a suit of heavy armor and a closed helmet despite the terrible heat — spoke in a hoarse voice:

"The wind is rising."

The other, a woman carrying an ornate parasol, pulled up the scarf to cover her face and sighed heavily.

Gilead lingered for a few moments, then nodded.

"It is."

He took a few more steps, then stopped and looked at the distant sky. After considering something for a few moments, Gilead continued walking.

"We will try to get to the nearest fissure in time. We might get lucky…"

By then, the knights had noticed that the wind was growing stronger, as well. Their faces paled, and a hint of subdued terror appeared in their eyes.

"Move! There is no time waste!"

After giving the command, Gilead switched from measured steps to a jog and led the conquest expedition south. The rest of them followed.

The man in the heavy armor fell back to guard the rear of the troop, while the woman carrying a parasol caught up with him.

As the wind pushed them forward with ferocious force, she said quietly:

"How many of us do you think will make it to the Citadel, Sir Gilead?"

Gilead glanced at her briefly, but did not respond.

The woman laughed bitterly.

"Is that supposed to mean that you don't know? Or that none of us will?"

He looked at her again, this time with disapproval.

"We will prevail."

She shook her head.

"You said the same when our soldiers were being slaughtered while traversing the surface of the Spine, and when we lost three cohorts on the Girdle as well. Even when we were being eaten alive in the jungle on the northern edge of the Femur, you kept telling us these words. And yes, sure… maybe we will prevail. But who will we be? A dozen survivors? A handful?"

She shook her head again.

"Sir Gilead… it is not too late to give up. We can still retreat to the waking world, carrying the knights across one at a time."

Gilead frowned and remained silent for a few moments.

"We can. But our orders were to conquer the Citadel, so we won't."

The woman moved the parasol lower, hiding her face behind it, and sighed heavily.

"Ever so loyal…"

Gilead smiled wistfully and raised a hand, shielding his face from the wind.

The members of the expedition rushed south, hoping to find shelter before it was too late… precarious as it might have been. However, luck was not on their side.

Before too long, the woman cursed and closed her parasol, afraid that

its fragile frame would be broken by the powerful gale. Soon, the wind blowing from the depths of Godgrave had turned so powerful that even Masters were struggling to keep their balance, roaring as it blew across the sloping vastness of the dead god's femur.

Worse still…

Dark flakes were raining from the sky, having been brought by the wind from the distant Sea of Ash.

Knowing that there was no time anymore, Gilead stopped and gritted his teeth.

Then he commanded his soldiers in a sober tone:

"Halt. Form a circle! Defend your brothers!"

The knights moved with the flawless precision of seasoned veterans. Whatever fear they might have felt had no effect on their readiness and coordination — just a few moments later, the expedition force formed a tight circular formation, the sharp blades of their swords pointing outward like a steel palisade.

The ash continued raining from the sky, and soon, the entire world was enveloped by a grey veil. The radiance of the overcast sky dimmed, and the suffocating heat had grown even more oppressive, battering the trembling humans like a celestial hammer.

The visibility had been reduced almost to zero.

In the twilight of the ashen storm, a brilliant light suddenly shone, chasing the darkness away. Gilead, who was standing shoulder to shoulder with his knights, had assumed his Transcendent form, turning into an ethereal figure that seemed to be woven out of pure, warm sunlight.

On the other side of the circle, the man wearing a heavy suit of armor raised his mace. In the next moment, his body seemed to expand, turning into an enormous steel warrior.

The woman was standing in the center of the circle, leaning lightly on her parasol. Her scarf was fluttering in the wind, and although her

face was hidden by the fabric, her green eyes were glowing in the ashen twilight like two emerald flames.

For a while, there was nothing in the grey world but the billowing clouds of swirling ash. There was no sound surrounding them but the howling of the wind.

And yet, the Knights of Valor seemed terrified, staring into the grey void with fear, despair, and wary anticipation.

Chapter-2068: Fragments of War (5)

…It came unseen, without sound, and without warning.

Or maybe it had not come at all.

The warriors of the Sword Army were still aiming their swords into the grey void, fearing — hoping — to see vague silhouettes of abominable creatures rushing at them from the ash.

But just like before, there was no sign of the enemy.

Instead, a knight standing by Gilead's side had been there a moment before… but a moment later, he was gone.

Gilead had not even noticed when the man disappeared. He simply became aware of an empty space to his left, and saw that no one was standing there after turning his head.

…By the time he turned his head back, the knight who had been standing to his right was gone, too.

A stifled scream echoed in the grey void, being carried away by the wind. It was not the scream of one of the missing Masters — instead, it was the scream of one of their comrades who had noticed the missing people, and could not contain his terror.

Gilead could not blame him.

Even he, who had braved the Third Nightmare and countless battles since, felt disturbed and uneasy, utterly powerless in this grey hell.

This was the peril of getting too close to ground in Godgrave. When the wind rose, it carried clouds of ash from the sea below… and

when the ash covered the world like a veil, beings who dwelled below rose to the surface, as well.

He would have hoped to face them in battle, no matter how dire such a battle would be, but from the day they reached the edges of the scarlet jungle till today, no one had even glimpsed what the harrowing enemy looked like.

They had been happy to escape the jungle at first. It was only later that Gilead realized that there was a reason why the scarlet infestation kept away from the lower reaches of the titanic femur.

Because it was too close to the Sea of Ash… and they were too, now.

Feeling angry and resentful, Gilead did the only thing he could do — continue to study the ash and remain as vigilant as he could.

…By the time the winds died down and the clouds of ash dissipated, revealing the vast expanse of sun-bleached bone once more, only half of his soldiers remained. The valiant Knights of Valor — those of them who remained — simply slumped on the ground, their faces so pale that they resembled ghosts.

Ashen.

Gilead dismissed his Transformation Ability and remained motionless for a while, counting the survivors and noting which of his comrades were gone.

Hopefully, dead… or maybe doomed to suffer a much more terrifying fate.

It was while he was counting the vanished that the woman with the parasol approached him once more, her face resting in the cool shadow.

Her green eyes were cold and somber.

"Have you reconsidered abandoning this doomed expedition, Sir Gilead?"

He stared at her for a few moments, then shook his head.

She laughed.

After a while, she asked:

"...It's your Flaw, isn't it?"

He simply raised an eyebrow.

"What exactly do you mean?"

She studied him coldly.

"Your indomitable loyalty. It is a result of your Flaw, right? That is why you serve the King so faithfully, despite despising him and his family so much."

Gilead smiled faintly and looked away.

After a while, he sighed.

"You people… are all the same."

The woman with the parasol raised an eyebrow.

"Oh?"

He nodded.

"None of you can imagine a world where a man stays loyal to his oaths for any reason other than having no other choice. Yes… I am loyal to the King. And yes, I have come to resent the man I am loyal to, after a while. But no, my Flaw has nothing to do with it."

Losing the smile, Gilead turned to the woman and looked at her with a somber expression.

"It is simply my choice. There are few things in this terrible world we can control — we do not choose our births, we do not choose our lives, and we rarely get to choose our deaths either. But there are still some choices that only we can make. A long time ago, I chose to be a knight of Clan Valor. That is all there is, and that is why I am loyal to the King."

The woman studied him with a hint of confusion.

"Even if the King is not worth being loyal to?"

Gilead frowned.

Why was she being so… bold? The Legacies from the vassal clans had always been less loyal to the throne than the members and retainers of Clan Valor were, true — but still, they were sufficiently steadfast and devoted to the cause. More importantly than that, they simply had no choice but to be loyal.

Because no one could defeat a Sovereign.

What had changed?

Was the pressure of the war and the mounting losses getting even to the proud Legacies? Or was this particular Legacy simply that impudent by nature?

Eventually, he shrugged.

"What does the King's character have to do with me being loyal? It's my loyalty, not his. I am the one who gave an oath, not him. If being true to a promise was predicated on how one felt about keeping it further down the road, then there wouldn't be much worth to one's word, would there?"

The woman studied him for a while, then sighed and shook her head.

"Yes... you are an icon of chivalry, Sir Gilead. A knight of whose nobility and virtue are beyond reproach. Do accept my ardent reverence and admiration. Still, what about the rest of us? It is fine if you are willing to march happily to your demise on the King's order. But must you drag us with you?"

Gilead stared at her silently for a few moments.

Then, he smiled.

"What are you talking about? Of course, I must. I mean…"

He waved his hand south and added nonchalantly:

"I can't claim the Citadel myself, since I already have one in the Sword Domain. So, I need at least one other Saint to stay alive and do it for me."

She looked at him, not amused.

"Surely, you jest."

Giland chuckled and turned away.

"Old Jest would do, considering that Rivergate was destroyed. Sadly, he is not here. But we are, so… let's get moving before the wind picks up again."

The woman sighed and hid under her parasol, mumbling something under her breath.

The rattled knights rose from the ground.

A minute later, the remains of the conquest force continued on their way south.

Chapter-2069: Fragments of War (6)

In a world submerged in eternal darkness, a pale light was shining on the vast expanse of flowing water. However, it was unable to penetrate the dreadful depths of the subterranean ocean, reflecting from its surface like the map of a night sky.

The gentle light was emanating from a beautiful woman who was sitting lonesomely on the rough surface of a stone cliff, looking at the dark water with a distant expression. She was delicate and lovely, with a slender build and a soft, enchanting face. Her hair was white, and her eyes seemed to glimmer with the afterglow of pale moonlight.

The corpses of the drowned lay scattered around the radiant beauty, staring into the darkness with empty eyes.

She was Moonveil, one of the seven Transcendent princesses of Song.

Looking into the distance, Moonveil sighed and turned her head slightly, listening to the darkness.

There were few sounds in the silence of the subterranean ocean. The distant hum of the great waterfalls that fed it, the tranquil murmurs of the flowing water, the eerie song of the powerful winds. The splintered pieces of a broken ship scraping quietly against the jagged stone.

And there, coming closer, another sound…

The powerful beating of someone's mighty wings.

Before too long, another figure landed on the cliff, wreathed in darkness.

It was a beautiful demoness with flawless alabaster skin and tenebrous eyes, her silken hair falling down like glossy obsidian. Two horns crowned her head, and her black wings folded to wrap themselves around her shoulders, hanging down like a leathery cloak.

Revel was effortlessly carrying a human corpse, drops of water falling from it to the wet stone. Considering her towering height, it looked like a toy in her pale hand.

She placed the dead man gently on the ground and straightened, looking at him with a somber expression.

Moonveil sighed.

"...No survivors?"

Revel lingered for a few moments, then slowly shook her head.

"No. And I don't think that I'll find any more bodies, either… whoever is missing was probably swallowed by whatever it is that dwells in these cursed waters."

The expedition the two of them led had departed from the Hollows of Breastbone Reach during a rainstorm. Overcoming countless perils, they navigated the treacherous network of rivers permeating the flooded jungle on an enchanted ship. Both Revel and Moonveil had to test the limits of their power, not holding anything back… even then, it was barely enough to survive.

Then, they crossed into the Hollows of the Second Rib and followed the powerful currents across its dark length, eventually plummeting down toward the Spine Ocean.

The journey had been long and difficult. Simply keeping the ship from being torn apart or crushed by the current was a tall task… and then, there were all the abominable monsters populating the hollow expanse of the titanic rib. There was the jungle itself, too — the vast fields of man-eating seaweed, the slithering vines hanging from the darkness above, the island-sized water lilies that enchanted the sailors and then swallowed the enthralled humans with terrible maws…

The closer to the Spine they traveled, the worse it became. They lost many good men and women before even reaching the subterranean ocean.

But they did reach it, in the end.

It was just that the ship had been shattered during the tumultuous crossing, and the crew had been drowned in the dark waters or killed by the creatures dwelling in the depths.

Now, the two of them were all who remained.

They stayed silent for a while, looking at the drowned corpses.

Eventually, Moonveil sighed.

"It's of no use. Mother's authority does not reach here, so they won't rise."

Revel lowered her head somberly.

The ship was destroyed, the crew was dead… and worse than that, they could not even retreat.

That was because the Call of Nightmare was assaulting their minds like a demented litany of ghostly cries, indicating that there were Seeds blooming somewhere beneath the surface. The Spine Ocean was a deadly trap, preventing them from retreating back into the waking world.

There was no way out.

Moonveil smiled.

"So, what? Are we going to die here?"

Revel glanced at her sister, who looked like a delicate doll in front of her towering Transcendent form, and shrugged.

"We might."

Moonveil chuckled.

"Is it strange that I feel relieved to know that I'll die beyond the reach of our mother's authority?"

Revel frowned.

"Yes. Of course, it does… you are her daughter. She would not have turned your body into a puppet."

Her sister sighed.

"I guess you are right."

With that, she looked around and asked in a curious tone:

"Do you think we can escape?"

Revel considered the answer for a few moments. Eventually, she nodded her horned head.

"I doubt we can climb back into the Second Rib. Even if we do, we won't survive the journey back to the Breastbone Hollows. The rainstorm has long passed, so the rivers would have dried out… it's a fool's errand."

She looked south.

"No, our only chance is to find the Citadel, conquer it, and use its Gateway to return to the waking world safely. So, that is what we must attempt to do."

Her expression darkened.

"However… there is a complication."

Moonveil tilted her head a little.

"Our pursuers? Have you seen them?"

Revel smiled darkly.

"Yes. They are a few dozen kilometers away. Their ships were destroyed while crossing into the Spine, as well, but many more of them have survived. They have plenty of monstrous aquatic Echoes

— some natural, some artificial. It's an entire fleet."

The Sword Army had sent an expedition into the Spine Ocean, as well. However, while Revel had been sent to conquer the Citadel, it was merely a secondary goal for them.

Their main goal was to kill Revel, and they were equipped well to achieve it. There were seven Sword Saints and a small army of Masters pursuing the daughters of the Queen, including a member of one of Valor's branch families. The forged Echoes brought by them into the subterranean ocean were both well-suited for braving its dark expanse and fearsome.

…Now, the members of the pursuing expedition were trapped in the spine of the dead deity, just like Revel and Moonveil were.

Revel looked at her sister for a while, and then smiled.

"Veil… I suddenly had a thought."

Moonveil raised an eyebrow.

"Is it, perhaps, a sane and benign thought of forgetting all our grudges and differences to form a pact of camaraderie with the Saints of the Sword Army? To fight side by side with fellow humans as allies and survive in this harrowing place together?"

Not receiving an answer immediately, she sighed.

"Uh-oh."

Revel looked in the direction where the enemy was gathering their forces, hidden by darkness, and said evenly:

"It strikes me that, while the Song Domain can grow stronger by conquering the Spine Citadel, the Sword Domain can grow weaker by losing these seven Saints and the Citadels controlled by them. So, even if we die here… as long as we die after making sure that they die first, the situation on the surface will still improve in our favor."

Moonveil closed her radiant eyes for a moment.

"Ah… I see. As expected."

She rose from the cold stone and looked where Revel was looking, as well.

After a while, she said:

"But why can't we do both? Kill the Saints... and conquer the Citadel. Wouldn't that be better?"

Revel smiled darkly.

"Yes. Let's do both… brave this dark ocean, survive the pursuers, and take the Citadel. Why settle for anything less?"

Spreading her wings, she lifted her sister off the ground gently, and then leaped into the air.

Chapter-2070: Fragments of War (7)

A shattered moon shone upon a shattered castle. The castle had always been a ruin, but now it was reduced to rubble. The rubble used to be surrounded by a deep lake, but now, the lake was gone.

Its bottom had been revealed, in all its mystery and horror.

Standing on the mound of debris that had once been a great rampart, Kai was looking down. Far below him, ancient ruins glistened in the pale moonlight. They were covered in mud and seaweed, but he could still recognize the shapes of beautiful stone edifices and smaller buildings beneath the mud.

The castle stood on a mountain, and there was a prosperous and sprawling city surrounding the mountain… or had been, once.

Others would not see, but Kai did. Buried in the mud, hidden in the darkness of the ancient buildings… there were human bones. There were too many of them to count. Myriads of skulls were staring at him with empty gazes, as if blaming him for being alive.

Millions of people must have perished here once, a long time ago. Some of the skeletons were intact, and some were crushed. He did not know what had killed the inhabitants of the ancient city, but whatever it was, their deaths had been sudden and brutal.

Perhaps it was the great flood that had drowned the city, burying it under the mass of water for thousands of years.

Perhaps the great flood had happened on the same day the moon had been shattered.

Looking at the drowned city that sprawled across the entire basin of

the lake, Kai wondered if there was a similar ruin at the bottom of the real Mirror Lake.

No… this was the real Mirror Lake. The Bastion he was familiar with was merely an illusion.

It was still strange to think about that.

Letting out a heavy sigh, he looked away from the ruins of the ancient city and turned his gaze to the sky.

The shattered moon was always the same, and Kai knew better than to stare at it too much. It could not tell him anything about time, anyway… however, he knew that there was going to be a full moon in the illusory version of Bastion today.

Which meant that, for a short time, reality and illusion would overlap a little, allowing for passage from one to another.

...Which meant that if Mordret wanted to infiltrate the capital of the Sword Domain, he had to do it today. There would be another battle, without a doubt… and a much more ferocious one than all the previous ones.

If that was even possible.

The ruin of the castle had not been turned to rubble without a reason, after all, and the bottom of the lake was not revealed by accident. For the past month, Kai and the other Saints whom Morgan of Valor had recruited were battling the Prince of Nothing in this dreamlike land, slowly changing the very landscape of true Bastion.

Even the ancient forest on the other side of the hollow lake was now charred and devastated, its outer edges burned to ash.

The bitter clash between the children of the King of Swords had been like a cataclysm, eroding the very land that was supposed to be their birthright. Looking at the scene of utter devastation surrounding him, Kai could not help but feel relieved that Morgan had decided to hide the illusory Bastion away and repel her brother's siege in this desolate place. Otherwise, the loss of life would have been more unbearable than during the Southern Campaign.

He had not seen a battle that calamitous yet… except maybe for the siege of Verge, where they had faced the Defiled Legion and the abominable First Seeker. That one, he still saw in his nightmares sometimes.

Miraculously, the defenders of Bastion had held their ground for an entire month. It was partially due to their own resolve and prowess, partially due to how tenacious Morgan of Valor and her enchanted body were, and partially due to sheer luck.

But mostly, it was because of the battlefield she had chosen.

Here in true Bastion, harrowing creatures whom Morgan called the Others dwelled. These nebulous beings inhabited reflections, and therefore, the powers of her brother were stifled.

Kai and the other defenders had only encountered the Others a few times, and even then, it had almost cost them their lives. But Mordret had to face these strange and alien beings every time he wanted to use the powers of his Aspect, which meant that he was fighting a war on two fronts.

One war against his sister and her Saints, and another war in the reflections.

That was why he had not been able to crush the defenders of the ruined castle yet despite his appalling power... yet... and that was why Bastion had not already fallen into the hands of the Song Domain.

At least that was how it seemed on the surface. Kai, nevertheless, felt uneasy… he somewhat knew Mordret, after all, having conquered two Nightmares and fought in Verge together.

When did that man not have a scheme hidden up his sleeve?

Something was not how it looked here, but Kai did not know what, and had no evidence to prove his suspicion.

In any case, Bastion could not fall. The Sword Domain was currently in a desperate situation, and they could not allow it to collapse just yet.

Looking down, Kai rubbed his face tiredly and soared into the air, flying smoothly to where a fire was burning in the heart of the ruins, and the tantalizing aroma of food was rising above an alloy pan.

As he landed gently on the ground and greeted the other Saints, a strong gale of wind crashed into the remains of a crumbling wall protecting the fire, and a small pebble fell from it down toward the pan.

Before it could plummet into the fragrant stew, however, Princess Morgan raised a hand and caught it without ever looking up. Her reaction was just as fast as one would expect from a Saint, but it was her senses that amazed Kai. Did she catch the pebble simply by hearing it brush against air, or was there a Memory she possessed that granted her complete awareness of her surroundings?

It was a good catch regardless. Having a dirty pebble fall into their stew would have made the meal less enjoyable.

Kai smiled and opened his mouth to say something.

But before he could, Morgan spoke first:

"Good catch. I know."

He looked at her blankly.

Letting out a sigh, the princess raised her head and looked at him with sunken eyes.

"...It will be ready in a few moments."

Her usually sharp gaze seemed a little dulled, and she looked a little disheveled. Morgan of Valor had always been neat and collected, maintaining flawless decorum and cold composure even in the middle of most dreadful fights. Her tidiness was a bit compulsive, even.

But now, her clothes were in disarray, and her beautiful raven hair was begging for a brush. She looked drained and exhausted — quite understandably so, considering that they all were.

It was just that, when Kai had seen her several hours ago, Morgan seemed much more full of vitality.

Looking at her now, he frowned.

Something… was wrong with Morgan of Valor.

Chapter-2071: Fragments of War (8)

It was a silent kind of terror, and one Kai was unfamiliar with. Meeting a new fear was almost amusing, like finding a new friend.

Truth be told, Kai was a fearful person. He had always been stifled by fear… first by fear of failure, shame, loneliness, and rejection, then by fear of death, agony, loss, and tragedy.

And regret, most of all.

It was just that he had gotten better at ignoring his fears as time went by, to the point that people often mistook him for someone who was innately brave. But he wasn't — not at all like his friends and companions, who seemed naturally fearless to an almost reckless degree.

Take Effie, for example…

Noticing the strange state of Morgan, she did not even grow tense. Instead, she looked at the pot of stew with a wistful expression, seemingly only worried about it being overturned. Her hand, meanwhile, moved closer to the shaft of her spear, which lay nearby.

Or Jet. Soul Reaper remained where she was, leaning comfortably on a boulder. That woman truly knew how to look comfortable anywhere… her icy blue eyes were following Morgan intently, but her expression remained calm and relaxed. A little amused, even.

Aether and Bloodwave did not seem to notice the strangeness, but at least Naeve seemed to be a normal human. He had grown still, throwing a cautious look at the princess.

It was a relief.

Kai, meanwhile, furtively looked around to see if there were any reflective surfaces around them. It was no surprise that the first thing his mind went to were the Others… there had already been an incident where one of those beings assumed the form of a human, after all.

That time, they had only avoided disaster because of Kai. The copy had spent several hours with them, pretending to be Aether… and although they did not know it then, the thing was growing stronger with every instance of someone witnessing it, addressing it, and otherwise acknowledging it as the real person in any way.

It was just that, no matter what it said, its words were neither truth nor a lie. Kai sensed the strange and eerie discrepancy almost immediately after returning from his patrol — that was how they managed to destroy the Other while only losing torrents of blood instead of losing people.

Aether himself had slept through the whole thing, only learning that someone out there had been walking around wearing his face when the battle was over.

If Morgan had been replaced by the Other…

She was surrounded by five people, and had been for at least an hour. If this thing functioned in the same manner as the previous one, then its existence had already been acknowledged to a frightening degree.

Kai felt his heart beating wildly, but then took a deep breath and calmed himself.

No, that was not the case. Earlier, she said… that she knew her catch was good. Those words were true, which was different from how the words of the previous Other had felt.

Then again, maybe the first one had simply not reached the point of mimicking human intent yet.

Unlike this one.

Morgan gave Kai a dubious look and shook her head.

"I'm not the Other."

Noticing his startled expression, she chuckled.

"It was written all over your face."

The first statement was true, but the second was not. Kai hesitated for a few moments, then looked at his companions and gave them a small nod.

Effie removed her hand from the spear and used it to cover a yawn.

"Is it..."

Morgan nodded.

"Yes, it's ready. Help yourselves."

The seven of them shared the stew — most of it went into Effie's bowl, of course — showing a voracious appetite. Battling the Prince of Nothing day after day, for an entire month, was a good way to work up an appetite.

Effie was beyond herself.

"My, oh my. The seasoning is just perfect! Just like I prefer it... no, really, I couldn't have made it better myself!"

At least someone was feeling uplifted...

Eventually, the pot grew empty.

In the silence that followed, Kai spoke somberly:

"Today, the full moon will rise above the illusory Bastion. You know what it means, Lady Morgan — your brother will definitely come again, and his assault will be even more dreadful this time."

She nodded calmly, not at all as worried as he thought she would be.

At this point, Morgan had to be all out of hidden aces, so Kai really did not know where her confidence was coming from.

It was a bit infuriating.

He studied the beautiful princess of Valor silently for a while, baffled by her nonchalance.

To be fair, Morgan did not quite look calm. More like… too ragged and tired to care. How come she had changed so much in a few hours?

He cleared his throat and glanced at Jet.

This time, it was her who gave him a nod.

Kai continued:

"That was why we discussed it among ourselves. We think that we found a stopgap solution on how to stop him."

Morgan glanced at him with the familiar spark of amusement in her vibrant vermilion eyes.

"Oh?"

Jet sighed, then leaned forward and raised a hand. Soon, a beautiful hourglass appeared on it, woven out of a whirlwind of radiant sparks.

She studied the hourglass for a few moments, then said lazily:

"This here is a Supreme Memory of the Fourth Tier that the three of us earned not too long ago… in quite a troublesome battle. It will not really prevent our eventual downfall, but it can buy us another day, and hopefully reveal whatever strategy Mordret is planning to employ next."

Aether looked at her with a slightly dazed expression.

"Saint Jet… you killed a Great Devil?"

She grinned.

"The three of us did, sure. Why? Have you guys never killed a Great Devil?"

The young Saint slowly shook his head.

"Cousin Naeve slayed a Great Beast once. But no… I have only ever seen Great Abominations from afar, in my Third Nightmare."

Effie tilted her head.

"What are you talking about? We killed a Great Monster two days ago, when the lake became shallow. Whose meat do you think was in that stew?"

Aether blinked a couple of times.

"Oh… that thing was of the Great Rank? I'm sorry. I did not notice."

The huntress stared at him for a couple of moments, then threw her head back and laughed.

"Gods… are you sure you haven't slain a Great Devil or two in the past? Maybe you just failed to notice their greatness."

The young Saint seemed to blush a little and looked away.

Jet smiled.

"In any case. This Memory is a bit special. It can only be used once, but…"

Morgan leaned back and grimaced.

"But it can make a day repeat itself one time. Yes, I know."

She was telling the truth. She did, indeed, know.

Kai frowned.

Then, his eyes widened.

The way she had caught the pebble without looking… the way she looked, and the way she spoke.

Even the taste of the stew.

He smiled suddenly.

"Lady Morgan… you have already used the hourglass, haven't you?"

The princess stared at him for a few long moments, then sighed.

"In a way."

Things were suddenly making much more sense. Kai was excited.

"So, you are living this day for the second time?"

Morgan slowly shook her head.

She remained silent for a while, then said in a grim tone:

"No. Not the second."

For a few moments, everyone was silent.

Then, Effie snorted incredulously.

"I can't believe… that this is happening to me for the second time!"

Chapter-2072: Fragments of War (9)

As Kai was slowly digesting the meaning of what Morgan had said, the three Saints of Night looked at Effie with various degrees of surprise on their faces.

Eventually, it was Naeve who asked in a subdued tone:

"...Second time?"

Effie let out a dejected sigh, covered her face with a palm, and nodded.

"Yeah… happened in our Third Nightmare. Kai was elsewhere, but Jet and I got stuck on an island where the same day was repeating itself endlessly. For us, just a few hours had passed… but in fact, it was more than a year. If not for Cassie — ah, that is Saint Song of the Fallen — eventually learning to retain her memories of the previous loops, somehow, we would have probably still been on that damned island."

Jet scoffed.

"What are you complaining about? It's not like we remember any of the previous days. In fact, that whole Nightmare is hard to remember."

The Nightwalker just stared at them silently.

Every Nightmare was a darkly wondrous experience, especially so the Third Nightmare… but an island where time endlessly repeated itself? That sounded a little bit too fantastical, even for Saints.

Effie raised an eyebrow.

"What? You guys would have loved it there. Our whole Third Nightmare happened in a place where there was nothing but water… literally, not land whatsoever anywhere around!"

With that, she grinned and looked at Morgan.

"That said…there is something I don't understand. Isn't the hourglass supposed to be a one-time thing?"

The princess of Valor shrugged indifferently.

"It is."

Then, a sharp, dangerous smile twisted her crimson lips.

"But you forget about my Ascended Ability, Raised by Wolves. I can embody enchantments of various Memories, remember? So, that was what I did. The first time Soul Reaper suggested using the hourglass, I engraved its enchantment onto my body and used it. The engraving was erased after one use, but the hourglass remained intact. The second time, I used the hourglass — it was destroyed, but when I returned to the past, the engraving was intact. So, by alternating between the two, I was able to make this day repeat itself over and over again."

Kai paled a little.

It was a strange thing, to know that time flowed differently for most of the world than it did for him… again. And that he did not remember who knew how many days spent side by side with Morgan.

'I hope… I didn't make a fool out of myself.'

He might have abandoned his idol persona a long time ago, but old habits died hard. Kai was still deathly afraid of behaving inappropriately in front of people.

Especially in front of actual royalty!

He coughed.

"How long has it been, exactly?"

Morgan yawned.

"It's already summer in the outside world. We've been here for months… oh, right. The Lord of Shadows massacred a dozen Song Saints. The Sword Army had won a glorious victory at Godheart, and the enemy is now in full retreat. What else? The waking world has become a secondary battlefield of the war, my sister has been punished for insubordination. That pretty much covers it, I think."

She lingered for a moment, and then added:

"But none of that concerns us, really. All we have to do is keep keeping my brother here."

Her voice sounded listless.

Kai, Effie, and Jet shared a dark glance. The news of so many things changing while they were unaware was highly unwelcome. After all, they had to follow their own plans, and that required coordination with the other members of the cohort.

'The Lord of Shadows… seems even more powerful than any of us had anticipated.'

Kai wasn't really surprised at the fact. That man... was really something else entirely. Talking to him made Kai feel like he was losing his mind, one impossible truth at a time.

What was it? A custody dispute with a Cursed Terror?

Kai shuddered, and shook his head a little to get rid of unnecessary thoughts.

Knowing that he would have to talk to Jet and Effie later, he then shifted his attention to Morgan.

Now that he knew why the proud princess of Valor did not look like her usual composed self… he was still concerned about her bleak and exhausted state.

This listlessness was not at all like Morgan.

Kai lingered for a moment.

"Excuse me for being blunt, Lady Morgan… but can I assume that you have not been able to repel today's attack even after trying it dozens of times?"

Morgan nodded solemnly.

"...Yes. You were right — he is going to go all out today. We tried many things to stop him, but each time, we failed. Worse still, that guy seemed to have managed to become aware of the hourglass, somehow. I think he is retaining his memories of the previous attempts now."

A cold gust of wind blew across the ruins, making their defenders shiver.

Jet leaned on her boulder, crossed her legs, and asked in a curious tone:

"So, what are you planning to do now, princess?"

Morgan looked at her tiredly.

Then, a dark smile twisted her lips.

"What else? I am going to continue doing the same thing — fighting him and turning the time back — over and over again. As many times as it takes."

Jet chuckled.

"Isn't that the definition of madness?"

Morgan shrugged.

"So what if it is? War does not have anything to do with sanity. All that matters is accomplishing your goals, and although we have not been able to beat Mordret, losing to him miserably every time we tried… beating him has never been our goal, to begin with."

She looked at them and raised an eyebrow.

"You seem to have forgotten, but we were not sent here to defeat my brother. We were sent here to prevent him from taking control of Bastion — until the Sovereigns conclude the war in Godgrave. And that is what we have been doing successfully all this time. In fact… we performed quite remarkably, if I do say so myself."

Her dark smile widened into an even darker grin.

"Sure, he has slaughtered us repeatedly, but he is still stuck on the other shore of the lake, is he not?"

The six Saints glanced at each other, then nodded slowly.

If seen that way, it did indeed make sense.

Kai sighed.

"So, what do we do today?"

Morgan lingered for a moment, then let out a bitter, joyless laugh.

Her crimson eyes flashed with fury and resentment.

And fatigue.

She sneered coldly.

"What else? We go and get slaughtered… one more time."

Chapter-2073: Fragments of War (10)

A strange and eerie scene was taking place under the radiant sky of Godgrave.

A great battle was raging above a bottomless dark chasm… yet it was utterly still and unmoving, as if frozen in place.

On the southern side of the chasm, swarms of soldiers were standing still like statues. Some stood straight, some were frozen midstep. Sweat was pouring down their pale faces, and their eyes were full of dark resignation… but none of them moved.

In front of them, the sun-bleached surface of the ancient bone was wet with blood. There had been a great bridge across the chasm once — that bridge was gone, and a new one was constructed on its ruins, looking like a marvel of military engineering.

The new bridge was held up by steel cables that had been shot over the chasm by powerful siege engines and anchored in the bone, with hastily raised scaffolds and cross-beams supporting a wide wooden floor.

That floor was now painted red, with countless bodies littering it like a macabre carpet. Many soldiers had perished while trying to hastily construct the bridge under an avalanche of arrows — the massive shields they had used to protect themselves lay there, as well, splintered and shattered by powerful enchantments and destructive Aspect Abilities of the defenders.

Many soldiers had perished while trying to cross the bridge, too. There were plenty of those who still lived, though… all of them were utterly motionless, some crouching behind shields, some standing tall. Even the wounded remained motionless, bleeding silently in the

middle of a frozen battle.

The blood fell from the bridge like a crimson rain, boiling and evaporating in the blinding sunlight.

Across the bridge, a mighty fortress towered above the dark chasm. Bodies had piled under its tall walls, where the battle was the most ferocious. Despite the heavy losses, the attackers managed to raise siege ladders and attach grappling hooks to the top of the ramparts — currently, countless warriors were climbing up, desperate to take over the wall.

Or rather, they had been climbing. At the moment, they were like frozen statues, too. Soldiers were standing still on the rungs of the ladders, holding enchanted shields above their heads. Others were clinging to the ropes with desperate gazes, their tortured muscles trembling from fatigue.

And finally, there were those who had crested the wall.

Sid was among those few.

She was standing at the top of the battlement, unmoving, staring at the tip of the enemy blade that had stopped mere centimeters from her neck.

The blade was so near, but had failed to touch her skin for an entire hour.

Around her, a ferocious melee seemed to have been frozen in time. The warriors of the two great armies were entangled, fighting and dying, killing each other — only all of them were motionless, not daring to move even a centimeter.

Some were about to kill their opponents, some were about to be killed. Their eyes were shining with terror, panic, indignation, rage, bloodlust… or growing dull with numbness, desperation, and exhaustion.

But all of them remained still.

It was quite an exquisite torment, to have the executioner's axe hang

above your neck , neither retreating nor falling down, without end.

…Flakes of ash were drifting in the air.

Of course, the furious battle came to a halt because the veil of clouds above the battlefield had broken, and harrowing sunlight poured down from the pristine white hell above.

The scene of frozen carnage was bathed in incandescent radiance, making the terrible slaughter seem strangely ethereal and heavenly. Of course, there was nothing beautiful about it — war was always appalling, after all, and this battle had been especially ghastly for the Sword Army.

The great army of the Sword Domain had split in two a few days earlier. A large contingent turned toward the Western First Rib — the lesser of the two Crossing Strongholds. The main body of the army, meanwhile, continued north, eventually reaching the Greater Stronghold at the precipice of the Collarbone Plain.

The Lord of Shadows was accompanying the western contingent, while both Changing Star and Sky Tide had not reached the battlefield yet. Nevertheless, the King commanded the soldier into an assault to probe the enemy's defenses.

That was how the Fire Keepers ended up participating in a large-scale battle without their lady for the first time in many years.

The elite forces of the Sword Army had stayed back at first, allowing the less experienced Awakened troops to amass and move forward to construct the bridge — it was a pragmatic decision, albeit a cruel one. The losses among the engineering corps and the soldiers that were assisting them were terrible…

Of course, the Fire Keepers were sent forward in the first wave, as well.

They were the first ones to step on the newly built bridge, too, leading the assault across its long expanse under a barrage of ranged attacks.

Perhaps without them, the assault would have ended before ever

reaching the walls of the fortress. But the Fire Keepers carved a path across the chasm, allowing the soldiers of the Sword Army to advance.

The gates were too impregnable to be broken without a sufficiently powerful siege ram, which was hard to carry across the chasm until the bridge was widened and reinforced. So, the only option they had was to scale the wall and try to take it.

And they did...

But at a dire cost.

Many more soldiers died under the walls of the Greater Stronghold. And the Fire Keepers… the luck that had been on their side since the Forgotten Shore finally turned its back on the Fire Keepers, and they finally suffered their first casualties since the siege of the Crimson Spire.

Full of bitterness and resentment, Sid couldn't help but think that, perhaps, that was the real punishment the King had intended for their lady. Not just to send her away, but to send her soldiers into deadly peril while she was away.

'Curse him... curse his entire damned clan...'

But there was no time for sorrow in the middle of a deadly battle. Despite losing several people, the Fire Keepers were the first ones to scale the wall.

And it was there, when the warriors of the Sword Army were desperately trying to carve out a bridgehead on the battlements, that the veil of clouds broke, and the world became drowned by the blinding radiance.

The battle halted in an instant.

And it was frozen still, an eternity later, with only the flakes of ash moving in the still and motionless world.

Sid felt a drop of sweat roll down her face.

Then, a wounded soldier who had been crouching a few steps away let out a tired groan and swayed, blood seeping between his fingers.

The man collapsed.

…His body turned to ash before even touching the ground.

Countless people witnessed his death, but no one moved. No one reacted. No one even averted their gaze.

A moment later, the furious battlefield was utterly silent once again, with only the wind singing its indifferent song.

Sid took a shallow breath and concentrated on the blade of the sword that was mere centimeters away from her neck, ready to cut it at any moment.

'What to do?'

There was nothing to do.

All she could do was wait.

Chapter-2074: Fragments of War (11)

At the end of it all, Sid felt as if her entire being was made from ash. Her vision was blurry and her arms felt numb, the weight of her sword and her shield like that of a mountain. Everything was permeated with blinding light and the smell of ash, which fell from the sky like snow.

The terror and excitement of battle had turned into resentment, and resentment turned into resignation. Most of all, there was pain and fatigue.

'...I wouldn't mind a good massage right about now.'

The irreverent thought made her want to smile.

Of course, she didn't.

Instead, she shifted her focus from the sword hanging at her neck to the radiant distance.

The shadows were moving, and the blinding sunlight was growing dim there, far away.

The breach in the veil of clouds was finally closing.

It took Sid a few moments to realize what was happening.

Then, her dull gaze regained some of its sharpness.

'I'll be damned.'

She was not destined to become ash, after all… at least not just yet.

What happened next transpired with a torturous slowness, but also

eerily fast.

The merciless white light dimmed, and the frozen battle thawed, exploding into a demented symphony of violence almost instantly once again.

It was as if no time had passed at all.

Far away, on the other side of the chasm, the soldiers staggered and continued marching toward the bridge. Those on the bridge pushed forward, desperate to reach the walls of the fortress before its defenders renewed the deadly barrage — it was a futile hope, of course, because a dense cloud of arrows rose into the sky just a split moment later. The arrows rained down, reaping dozens of lives.

The soldiers who had been climbing the wall moved, too. Some simply released their hold on the ropes and plummeted down, too tired and spent to do anything else. Some swayed but stubbornly continued to climb, knowing that nothing but death awaited for them on the ground.

Nothing but death awaited for them atop the wall, too.

Sid knew it better than most.

As soon as the radiance of the white abyss dimmed, her opponent thrust the sword forward. The momentum of his initial swing had been exhausted, but the blade was sharp enough to cut her throat even without much force behind it.

The bastard did not hesitate at all.

…She didn't hesitate, either.

Sid had been given plenty of time to consider her next move, after all.

Activating her Awakened Ability, Sid hardened her body for a few moments. The enemy sword produced a jarring scraping sound as it traveled across her skin, unable to cut it — in the next moment, Sid activated her Dormant Ability and slammed her shield into the enemy's chest, sending him flying back like a rag doll.

The blow was not powerful enough to break a Master, but it did toss him over the edge of the battlements. The man plummeted down with a shriek, disappearing from view. The walls of the fortress were tall, so it was unclear whether he would survive the fall or not.

Sid did not care either way. She had other matters to worry about…

There were plenty more enemies around her, all wishing to tear her apart. Too many, even — the situation was quite desperate.

Despite the fact that the Fire Keepers had managed to crest the wall and clear a path up for the soldiers of the Sword Army, their position was highly precarious. There were several hundred warriors of the Sword Domain on the battlements now… but there were tens of thousands of enemies they had to contend against.

Their chances did not look too good.

Blocking a barrage of blows and moving nimbly between the enemies, Sid slashed and pierced with her sword. A few moments later, she found herself side by side with Shim, the field leader of the Fire Keepers, and pressed her back against his.

Both of them were breathing heavily, utterly exhausted after having stormed the bridge, scaled the wall, and endured the Cloudbreak on top of that. Their armor was battered and painted red by blood, and their faces were deathly pale.

Their eyes were calm and cold, though, devoid of even a hint of panic.

Sid grinned.

"Hey, Shim… this is pretty bad, huh?"

They separated to deal with their enemies, then moved closer to guard each other's backs once again.

He let out an indifferent sigh.

"...It's less than ideal, true."

At that moment, a Master from one of the vassal Legacy clans of Song lunged at the nonchalant healer from the mass of enemy soldiers. Shim became preoccupied, while Sid had to deal with a swarm of Awakened soldiers aiming to bleed her to death.

Soon enough, surrounded by the stench of blood, the two of them found each other once again.

Sid was staring at her shoulder, which was pierced by an enemy arrow. Usually, she would have been able to dodge or deflect it, but this time, the archer had turned out to be unusually skilled. Not only did the arrow find a crack in her armor, but it had also been shot at the precise moment when she could not do anything to avoid being hit.

More than that, the arrow seemed to possess a peculiar enchantment that made it weigh hundreds of kilograms. Sid was barely able to withstand the burden, and she had to drop her shield.

If there was one mercy, it was that she was still alive. With how skilled the archer was, it would not have been hard for them to sink the arrow into her eye.

'Lucky me...'

Sid grimaced, then gritted her teeth and grabbed the arrow, trying to pull it from her flesh. Of course, the arrowhead had turned out to be barbed, which made for some truly exquisite pain.

She cursed quietly.

"I can't tell if we're gaining ground or being pushed back."

Shim scoffed.

"We are being pushed back, of course. It's hopeless. We were never going to take the wall this way."

Finally managing to rid herself of the heavy burden of the enchanted arrow, Sid glanced at him darkly.

"What the hell are we doing here, then?"

He shrugged.

"Waiting for them to sound the retreat. They'll do it once more of us die."

Sid was speechless for a moment, then shook her head dejectedly.

"Let's wait, then. Bah, what a dreadful day…"

They lunged back into the battle, struggling desperately against the endless tide of Song soldiers.

The warriors of the Sword Domain continued to climb the wall, and continued to die. Slowly but surely, they were pushed back to the ladders, finding themselves on the verge of being thrown down.

'When are they going to sound the damned horn?'

Sid was bleeding, in pain, and tired.

All of them were.

But the order to retreat was still not coming.

She sighed.

'Ah... I really hate sieges...'

Chapter-2075: Fragments of War (12)

From afar, the great fortress of Song looked like a disturbed anthill. Countless tiny figures were swarming its walls — some climbing them, some falling down. The approach to the fortress was covered by a dark mass of moving bodies, with arrows falling down like rain.

Of course, these dark figures were not ants. They were humans, and human lives were being lost every moment.

Anvil of Valor was once again observing the battle from the platform on the head of a towering Echo, accompanied by the Saints of the Sword Domain. Only, this time, Nephis of the Immortal Flame was not here to defy him… so, everyone remained still, observing the distant battle in grim silence.

The Greater Crossing Stronghold was refusing to fall.

The terrain was too disadvantageous, and the fortress was too impregnable. The valor of its defenders was beyond reproach. Of course, this first attack on the fearsome fortifications of the Song Army was merely meant to probe their defenses… but still. It was a troubling sight.

By then, it was already apparent that the costly assault would not succeed.

Anvil studied the distant fortress for a few more moments, then turned his head and looked at Cassie. The blind seer was standing closer than any other Saint to him, almost as if she was the sole recipient of the King's favor.

He spoke:

"Lady Cassia… how are things advancing in the west?"

She lowered her head a little.

"It is worse than here, Your Majesty. The Lesser Stronghold still stands… they managed to bring down the bridge, as well. Our casualties are severe, and no one managed to even reach the walls."

Her voice was respectful and neutral… not at all brimming with anger, hatred, and resentment.

He studied her for a few moments, then looked away with a somber expression.

Anvil remained silent for a while longer, then let out a sigh.

"...Sound the retreat."

Soon, the deafening sound of a war horn thundered above the dark chasm. The distant anthill exploded with activity as the battered soldiers of the Sword Army abandoned the walls of the fortress and slowly fell back. Of course, the retreat was just as bloody as the initial assault… not the least of all because those killed on the bridge had already risen, attacking their former comrades from the rear.

Nevertheless, in the end, the warriors of the Sword Domain managed to cross back. The bridge was destroyed just a few moments later and plummeted into the chasm.

The battlefield grew silent.

…The Song Army had lost many soldiers, as well, but its numbers were now greater than before. That was because those who had died trying to scale the walls of the fortress were now standing at the edge of the chasm, staring across its dark breadth with empty eyes.

Anvil frowned.

A few moments later, he said evenly:

"We will establish three bridges next time and attack the wings of the fortress, as well. Summon the leader of the engineering corps… the

design worked, but we must study how the bridge at the Lesser Crossing was brought down to further improve it…"

Bowing silently, Cassie turned around and left the platform.

***

On the other side of the chasm, Seishan was looking at the distant mass of the Sword Army from the tallest bastion of the great fortress. Her flawless grey skin was marred by stains of soot from the falling flakes of ash, and her scarlet lips were twisted slightly into a grim smile.

Soon enough, Beastmaster joined her.

"According to the initial report, our casualties are mild — unlike the Sword Army. They made it further than expected, but that just ended up costing them more men. Of course, the King of Valor was not serious this time… still, it's a good indicator."

Seishan nodded slowly.

"They'll probably launch several bridges at the same time, next time. They'll send the Knights of Valor into the battle, too… possibly assemble a squadron of elites trained at riding winged Echoes. I hope your herd of flying thralls is ready."

Beastmaster nodded.

"Of course."

Seishan lingered for a few moments, then sighed.

"They won't launch another assault before Sky Tide and Changing Star arrive, though. Those thralls will be necessary to repel the attack from the Ivory Island… our forces will be spread thin. It might get difficult."

The beautiful enchantress looked at the horizon, as if expecting to see the graceful silhouette of the Ivory Tower appearing over the horizon.

Then, she shook her head.

"That is only the lesser problem, isn't it? The main problem is Changing Star herself. Before, both our mother and the King of Valor held us Saints back out of fear that we would kill each other off. But now, everyone knows that a battle between Saints would become a one-sided slaughter due to that girl, Nephis, and her Shadow. So, Anvil can simply set her loose."

Seishan shrugged.

"He can, and she would probably be able to demolish this entire fortress by herself. The Lord of Shadows, meanwhile, is more than capable of taking the Lesser Stronghold from Howl, Hel, and Silence. But then nothing would stop us from eviscerating their entire Awakened army while those two are busy. So, he won't."

Beastmaster studied her for a few moments, then mumbled under her breath:

"Demolish this entire fortress by herself… aren't you giving her too much credit? I spent a lot of effort building this stronghold, you know."

Seishan looked at her without any amusement.

"You were there when Mordret told mother about what he had experienced in the Third Nightmare, were you not? Nephis obliterated an entire city there, not to mention incinerating half of another. And she was merely a Master back then… so, don't underestimate her Aspect."

Beastmaster made an unhappy face and looked away.

"Fine. What do we do, then?"

After lingering for a while, Seishan shrugged.

"Treat the wounded, equip mother's puppets with weapons and armor, and prepare for the next assault as best we can. We'll see what happens then."

Soon, they left the tall bastion.

The first siege of the Greater Stronghold was over.

But not at all the last…

Chapter-2076: Fragments of War (13)

Just as Seishan had predicted, the second assault on the Greater Crossing Stronghold only happened after the Ivory Island arrived on the battlefield.

It was a sight both daunting and awesome. The flying island moved slowly across the chasm, effortlessly enduring a barrage of destructive attacks. A billowing cloud of smoke obscured it for a few moments like a fluttering mantle, but then, the graceful silhouette of the Ivory Tower revealed itself from the smoke once again.

Pristine and unblemished.

At the same moment, the elites of the Sword Army stationed on the island unleashed their own arrows, raining death and destruction down upon the defenders of the fortress.

The island moved slowly across the chasm, high in the sky, suppressing the Song soldiers. Using the opportunity, three sets of powerful cables were shot across the darkness, embedding themselves into the ancient bone on the other side.

Thousands of soldiers rushed forward, in a hurry to build up the bridges. Enormous shields were carried in front of them, protecting the engineers from the onslaught of ranged attacks. Slowly but surely, the three bridges started to take shape.

Soon, the defenders of the Greater Crossing had to fight on four fronts. Both the left and the right wing of the impregnable fortress, as well as its main keep, were being assaulted by the soldiers of the Sword Domain, while the Ivory Island loomed above.

This time, the most seasoned veterans of the Sword Army, including

the Knights of Valor, were leading the assault.

As the Ivory Island neared the middle of the dark chasm, threatening to break through the defenses of Song, a vast swarm of appalling Nightmare Creatures rose from behind the fortress, aiming to deliver a subjugation force and conquer the flying Citadel — in response, Knights mounted on winged Echoes rushed to intercept them.

The thralls of Beastmaster clashed in the air with the warriors riding the Echoes, and a fierce battle unfolded above the terrible bloodshed happening below.

All hell broke loose, threatening to pass into the annals of history as one of the most dire and perilous battles of the dark era of the Nightmare Spell.

…Far away, in the west, things weren't going much better at the Lesser Crossing.

The First Rib, while still vast and humbling in scale, had a much narrower point of connection to the breastbone of the titanic skeleton. Therefore, the stronghold there was smaller, and the soldiers guarding it were fewer in number. Nevertheless, the bloodshed there was just as terrible.

There was no flying island there to lead the assault, so the soldiers of the Sword Army could only rely on the engineered bridges. No one was suppressing the defenders of the stronghold by raining death upon them from the sky, either, so the casualties of the attacking side were much more severe.

Sunny observed the battle with a grim expression, feeling a suffocating fury rattle his mind at the sight of so many people dying senselessly. But there was nothing he could do to stop the shameful atrocity happening right in front of his eyes… no, that was not true.

There was plenty Sunny could do.

He could manifest a bridge of shadows wide enough to carry thousands of additional soldiers across. He could send his Shadows to break the walls of the fortress. He could command the army to retreat

and refuse to accept the orders of the King.

But then what?

Using his powers would give the Saints of Song a justification to unleash theirs, in turn. Sure, Sunny could probably give them all a good fight… but how many soldiers would become collateral damage in the clash of Transcendent powerhouses?

Rebelling against the King of Swords prematurely, meanwhile, would just cost Sunny his life and make deposing the Sovereigns that much harder, if not entirely impossible.

So, all he could do was grind his teeth, bide his time, and endure the poisonous feeling of anger.

'How much longer?'

He knew that the King of Swords was observing the Lesser Crossing closely. Cassie was not the only one, by far, providing him with information. Therefore, Sunny could not end the battle until it truly looked like the forces of the Sword Domain had no chance of winning.

And the soldiers… as dispirited and disillusioned as they were, the soldiers still fought valiantly. They strived to achieve victory with all their hearts, not the least of all because victory seemed like the only salvation to them.

'Damnation.'

Hiding his face behind Weaver's Mask, Sunny observed the battle silently.

Eventually, the bloodshed had become too dreadful, and the momentum of the assault broke.

He had his excuse.

"Retreat!"

Somewhere far away, the assault on the Greater Stronghold was

ending in a deadly stalemate, as well. The gates of the fortress had withstood the blows of a specially enchanted siege ram, and neither of the three attacking forces managed to create a stable bridgehead on the battlements.

The Ivory Island was forced to retreat, as well, swarmed by the thralls of Beastmaster and under threat of being taken by the warriors of Song.

It was another defeat.

'Damn it, damn it, damn it!'

Full of resentment, Sunny looked away from the gruesome scene of the battle and walked off.

Soon enough, the battle was over, and he hid himself in his tent.

He knew that Anvil would not be satisfied with just two failed assaults… especially because the second had been much more deadly for the Song Army then the first.

There would be a third assault, and the fourth, and the fifth…

Until one of the sides broke.

…It was when Sunny was going over the battle in his mind and coming up with ideas on how to minimize the casualties next time that someone approached his tent.

There was a polite knock, and a man wearing a vermilion cloak of the royal clan entered it slowly.

Sunny stared at him coldly from behind his mask.

"What?"

The man bowed, and the spoke in a reverent tone:

"Lord Shadow, sir. The King has sent you a special order…":

Chapter-2077: Fragments of War (14)

The Sword Army had crashed against the Two Crossings like a tidal wave.

And just like a wave, it had receded over and over again, unable to break through the impregnable barrier. Even the arrival of the Ivory Island did not manage to breach the defenses of the entrenched Song Army — at least not yet. The death toll among the defenders increased sharply, and each assault now cost them more.

But the losses among the attackers were no less dire.

The siege had become a stalemate. Countless soldiers on both sides were dying, and the casualties were mounting. And yet, neither side could crush the enemy... the situation simply continued to escalate endlessly, making it feel as if a breaking point would arrive soon.

Those soldiers who were lucky enough to survive were being forged into truly dauntless warriors. The war was like a crucible that produced the toughest of alloys, but rigid steel could be easily broken.

Everyone had a limit, and many people were approaching theirs.

Rain did not know what was happening in the camp of the Sword Army, but here in the Greater Stronghold, the mood of the soldiers was hitting rock bottom. Even though they were suffering less than the poor wretches who had to assault the walls of the fortress under a rain of arrows, they still suffered terribly. People were dying, and people were receiving terrible wounds.

There were not enough Awakened healers to tend to everyone, so many of the wounded could only receive mundane treatment. The

field hospital of the Song Army was struggling to contend with the influx of patients, its overcrowded halls permeated by the stench of blood and despair.

Rain knew because she volunteered as a nurse at the hospital when she had free time. It wasn't just out of the goodness of her heart, but also because she felt bitterly useless. She was not a very good soldier anymore, after all, considering her inability to deal fatal wounds to enemies... even if those enemies were in the process of brutally killing her comrades.

So, Rain wanted to be of use to her fellow soldiers in some other way. There were a lot of things to do in an army as large as the Song Army was for it to function properly, many of them having nothing to do with combat. She was not ready to ask Tamar for an official transfer — which her friend would without a doubt arrange if need be — because she wasn't quite ready to abandon her cohort. But sparing a few hours doing menial jobs here and there was fine.

The field hospital was like a pit of resignation and despair.

...It wasn't much better in other parts of the fortress, either.

Morale was low, and soldiers were exhausted — both mentally and physically. To their desperation, there did not seem to be an end to the dreadful siege anywhere in sight. It just continued day after day, while the enemy was learning from each failed assault and employing increasingly effective strategies the next time.

Of course, the soldiers of the Song Army were learning, too. They had gotten much better at damaging the makeshift bridges, preventing the soldiers of the Sword Army from raising siege ladders, defending themselves against the shock troopers who dropped onto the battlefield from the Ivory Island, and so much more.

Each lesson was paid for in blood.

The remains of Tamar's centuria had been merged with another company and assigned a wooden barrack. The soldiers rested there between the battles, which happened once every few days — the last one had been especially terrible, so everyone was slow to recover

their vitality.

As if they could recover it at all.

Rain entered the barrack and looked around, studying her fellow soldiers.

Some were huddled together in the corner, playing cards. The game was supposed to be boisterous and energetic, but looked mechanical and joyless instead.

Some were tending to their equipment or bandaging minor scrapes. Their gazes were bleak and distant.

Most were simply laying on their cots, though, unable to fall asleep, but also too drained to do anything else. They just stared at the ceiling with hollow eyes, indifferent to what was happening around them.

At least their barrack was better off than most. Tamar had a cooling Memory in her arsenal, so it was not as hot as it would have been otherwise… Rain should have been able to enjoy the reprieve from the sweltering heat, but she found herself indifferent to such minor comforts these days..

Walking over to her bunk, she dismissed the leather elements of the Puppeteer's Shroud and fell on it heavily. Luckily, her bunk was the lower one — well, of course it was. After all, Rain could not walk on air like Tamar.

Fleur, who had been recovering from essence exhaustion, glanced at her from the next bunk in the row. The delicate girl remained silent for a while, then sighed.

"Rani… were you at the baths?"

Rain nodded.

"Yeah. I heard that the attacks on the supply convoys had stopped, so they're not rationing water as strictly now. It's a nice change of pace."

A fragile smile appeared on Fleur's face.

"You're so calm."

Rain looked at her in confusion.

"Me, calm? Goodness. You must have confused me for someone else."

Fleur shook her head weakly.

"No… I can't even muster enough motivation to get up. The rest are pretty much the same. But you just go about your routine like usual."

Rain hesitated for a bit, then shrugged.

"It's just a habit, I guess. Back in Ravenheart, I used to reward myself with a good soak in the baths after a hunt — they have proper facilities back home, of course, not just makeshift showers. But still. It feels nice to do the same after a battle."

Fleur smiled a little wider, then looked away.

After a while, she asked:

"Do you think we'll get to return? Home?"

Rain sprawled on her bunk and sighed.

"Sure. When the war is over."

Hearing that, a soldier laying a few meters away turned his head, stared at her, and then scoffed.

"Fool… we will all be dead by the time this damn war is over."

She stared at him coldly, not at all happy that her attempt to cheer Fleur up had been thwarted.

But also not really knowing how to retort.

'That idiot…'

There was some merit to his words.

Rain raised an eyebrow.

"What are you…"

But the soldier interrupted her mid-sentence.

"What is even the point of the war? It doesn't make sense. That bastard, the King of Swords, claimed that it was on behalf of Changing Star, who had almost died at the hands of Song assassins. But Lady Nephis herself was against the war, to begin with! She still is. It's just the royals who are thirsty for blood."

Another soldier glared at him darkly.

"What the hell are you even saying? There is no way that those assassins were from the Song Domain. It was just an excuse Clan Valor used to start the war. So what was the Queen supposed to do? Roll over and allow those bastards to plunder our land? It's not like she wanted this to happen!"

The first soldier remained silent for a few moments, then scoffed.

"I don't know whether she wanted the war to happen or not. All I know is that the Sovereigns started it, and yet it is us puny mortals who are dying in it. If they want to fight so badly, why don't they fight among themselves? What's the point of bleeding us dry instead?"

Turning his head, he stared at Rain.

"What do you think, Rani? Does any of this make any sense?"

She lingered for a bit, then sighed.

"Is that how the rest of you feel, as well?"

A few soldiers grumbled. The rest did not respond, simply looking at her with dark, tired expressions.

Rain shook her head.

"What I think… is that you should keep your mouths shut. This is a royal legion. It's alright if Tamar hears you, but if one of the Blood Sisters happens to be nearby when you spout such things, there's

gonna be trouble."

Morale was that bad in one of the seven royal legions. She didn't even want to imagine how other brigades were faring.

Looking at the ceiling, Rain sighed heavily.

'...What will become of the Song Domain?'

It was hard to remain hopeful.

Or sympathetic, really... many people just wanted for the war to be over, secretly losing interest in which side won, or even if there was a winner at all. But the war showed no sign of slowing down.

It only ever seemed to accelerate.

Were they really going to all die here?

The belligerent soldier cursed with dark resentment.

"What, I can't even talk now? Great. That's great! They expect us to just die silently, I guess... how are we different from the pilgrims, then?"

That was a good question.

Were they any different, really?

Letting out a dispirited sneer, the soldier turned away and covered himself with a blanket. Rain stared at his vague silhouette with pity.

'That fool. He's going to cook alive under that blanket.'

Tamar's cooling Memory was great, but it wasn't that great.

The rest of the soldiers listened to her advice and dropped the topic.

She could see it in their eyes, though…

Dejection.

They were brave people, and they were ready to die in order to

protect their home.

But there was a difference between dying for a good cause and dying senselessly.

And this war…

Was making less and less sense with each day.

Chapter-2078: Fragments of War (15)

Standing in the rubble, Kai took a deep breath, then exhaled slowly.

A powerful gust of wind rose from that one breath, sending a cloud of dust billowing into the air.

When he looked up, the usual soft placidity of his welcoming green eyes was replaced by a cold, sharp gleam.

The night suddenly seemed darker, the winds singing a haunting song as they blew across the ruins.

"Are you ready?"

He looked at Morgan of Valor and nodded curtly.

A pale smile appeared on her scarlet lips.

"No time to waste, then."

Kai looked away. His gaze pierced the piles of stone rubble, the vast expanse of the empty lake, and the palisade of scorched trees standing on its distant shore. No obstacle could obscure his sight, and no distance was too great…

Well, in theory.

In truth, Kai could not see too far despite having the ability to discern the individual grains of sand on a beach many kilometers away. That was for a simple reason… the curvature of the world. The world was not flat, so in normal circumstances, its curve obscured things at around five kilometers away.

At least that was how things worked on Earth. Here in the Dream

Realm, though, the horizon was not quite as predictable. What else could one expect from a world where the sky was a patchwork of different heavens? Sometimes, the horizon was five kilometers away. In other places, it was much further or noticeably closer. In some places, there was no curve to the world at all.

Those places were few and far between, though, so there was still a limit to how far Kai could usually see.

He could try to pierce the very depths of earth with his gaze, of course, thus ignoring the horizon. But his Awakened Ability was not omnipotent. Doing something like that was not impossible, but would cost too much essence.

Especially when there was a much simpler way to see beyond the horizon — so simple, in fact, that it was accessible to all people… but especially so to Kai.

It was looking at the horizon from elevation.

The higher one was, the less important the curvature of the world became. Similarly, the taller the target was, the easier it was to see from a distance. It was such an obvious truth, but one that found new meaning in the battles of Transcendent beings.

Which was why what Kai was about to do was dangerous.

After a month of furious battles, there were not a lot of elevated points left in the ancient ruins. Everything had been toppled and obliterated, turning into piles of rubble… but Kai did not need to climb a high tower.

Instead, he simply soared into the air, ascending naturally into the night sky.

Higher, and higher, and higher still…

Until the whole world was in front of him like a moonlit canvas.

For a few moments, his graceful silhouette was outlined against the radiant fragments of the shattered moon.

Then, Kai took a deep breath and raised his bow.

That bow of his was a Transcendent Memory of the Fifth Tier, which he had earned for slaying the Corrupted Tyrant, Malignant Grave Root, in Antarctica. It was a sublime and deadly weapon, more than powerful enough to accomplish his goals.

What mattered just as much were the arrows he would use. Kai had plenty of Transcendent arrows, each suited for a different task… most were meant to deliver untold death and destruction, of course.

He even possessed one that was Supreme. However, now was not the right time to use it yet.

Hovering high above the ruins of true Bastion, bathed in moonlight and embraced by the winds, Kai turned his gaze to the dark expanse of the ancient forest. There, dozens of kilometers away, the enemy was moving under the cover of twisted branches. A vast swath of the forest was veiled by a thick shroud of flowing mist that Mordret had summoned to obscure his movements…

But he could not hide from Kai, especially now that Morgan had pointed him in the right direction.

'There.'

The princess told them that the final assault would begin with a wave of Nightmare Creatures — these ones much more powerful than those Mordret had used as vessels before, and whom he had been collecting slowly and in secret throughout the month of dreadful battles.

Kai had to make sure that the Nightmare Creatures were destroyed, or at least severely weakened, by the time they reached the ruins of the ancient castle.

Nocking an arrow on the string of his enchanted bow, Kai strained his muscles and drew it to his ear. With his auburn hair dancing wildly in the wind and his green eyes shining in the pale moonlight, he looked upon the dark expanse of the abominable forest coldly.

Then, he spoke:

"Strike true."

His words were a command that brimmed with mystical authority… one aimed at himself, but also at the world itself.

Feeling a sudden surge of dire power, Kai released the string.

There was a deafening thunderclap when he did.

The arrow surged forward with astonishing speed, tearing up the dark sky. It flew further and further away, easily crossing the empty lake and streaking above the ancient forest.

Until, finally…

Dozens of kilometers away, it silently and unerringly pierced the eye of a swiftly moving Nightmare Creature.

A moment later, a tremendous explosion shook the very foundations of the world.

An enormous conflagration spread from the point of impact in a straight line, swallowing several square kilometers of the abominable forest. Countless trees were incinerated, and even more were shattered and toppled by a devastating shockwave. A towering plume of raging flame rose high into the sky, and then subsided, spreading in every direction.

The darkness of the night was torn apart by the fierce glow of that hungry fire.

…Dozens of kilometers away, in the silent sky above the ruined castle, Kai observed the devastation calmly.

He had already found several other vessels of the Prince of Nothing, and a second arrow was already manifesting in his hand.

Of course, Mordret had to have noticed him too.

After all, this high above ground, Kai was not hidden from sight by the horizon.

In fact, he was easily noticeable and utterly in the open — a perfect target.

And he was not the only one who could send a projectile flying across the vastness of the empty lake.

'I wonder... how many times I died this way.'

He felt like it would be a shame, to die during the first wave of the attack. These Nightmare Creatures were merely an appetizer, after all… the main course was yet to show itself. According to Morgan, today, Mordret would use both these scavenged vessels and the bodies of the Saints of Night in turns.

Actually, Kai wasn't that keen on dying in the second wave, either. He would very much prefer to survive. There were too many things to enjoy in life, and there were also things that he still needed to do.

Life was precious.

Nevertheless, he did not dive to the ground in order to seek cover.

Instead, he simply nocked the second arrow on the string, and drew his bow again.

His voice resounded from the dark sky like a beautiful, dreadful melody.

"...Destroy."

The final battle for Bastion — the latest one in the long procession of prior final battles — had commenced once more.

Chapter-2079: Fragments of War (16)

Morgan observed the battle with an impassive expression. Her gaze was cold, and her heart remained calm, untouched by the awe and terror of the calamitous confrontation. It was not as if she had not seen this battle transpire before… everything that was happening had already happened, and even if there were minor divergences along the way, the ending was always the same.

A crushing defeat.

It was funny…

Battles as great and destructive as this one had been unheard of in the past, but now, the dreadful sight of it all was so familiar as to almost seem boring.

Similarly, Morgan had rarely tasted defeat before. But now, its flavor never seemed to leave her.

It was all a grand game, of course. Morgan lost to Mordret every day, but in doing so, she was reaching her goals while denying his ambition. So, victory was a question of perspective.

The war in Godgrave had been raging for many months now, but Bastion was still held firmly by the Great Clan Valor.

Who was being defeated? Who was winning?

Perhaps Morgan and her brother were in a stalemate.

…She was tired, though. Her companions started these identical days anew, but Morgan remembered each and every one. For her, these past months had been one dire, devastating, never-ending battle. One

that seemed hopeless, at that. Its outcome was unclear, and after a while, even its cause was starting to seem vague.

It was highly likely that not even people on the frontlines of Godgrave had experienced such intense warfare. There was a pace and cadence to a war, after all. Terrible battles were followed by long periods of relative peace while the battered armies regrouped and prepared for the next clash. But here in true Bastion, there was no lull to the violence. It was constant and incessant.

The most furious battlefield of the Great Domain War was hidden out of sight and shrouded in mystery, with only two people experiencing its terror.

No wonder Morgan was tired.

She wondered if her brother was tired, too…

If he was, he did not show it.

Today's battle was nearing a conclusion. The Nightmare Creatures had long been eliminated, and so were many of his Transvendent vessels.

Saint Aether was dead. Naeve and Bloodwave were either dead or dying, too. Raised by Wolves was almost done tearing Typhaon apart, rivers of blood flowing from harrowing wounds on her flawless body. The gargantuan corpse of Knossos lay on the ruins of the drowned city, and somewhere beneath it, Nightingale was struggling to free his draconic body from under the rubble.

Soul Reaper was desperately trying to preserve her soul essence while fighting the few remaining Night Saints.

The ruins of the castle were in a sorry state, the very mountains on which they stood practically split apart by a titanic blow.

'He'll snow himself soon.'

And just as Morgan expected, her brother finally revealed his original body, landing easily on a fragment of a crumbled wall a dozen meters away from her.

Sparing Morgan a pleasant smile, he bowed politely.

"Ah, dear sister. How wonderful it is to see you again."

She just studied him somberly.

No… no, that bastard was not tired at all. If anything, he seemed to be having the time of his life.

Instead of answering, Morgan simply raised her sword.

Mordret chuckled.

"I am not going to lie, this is quite a predicament. I often dreamed about killing the members of my despicable family slowly, but this… this has been a bit too slow even for my taste."

He raised his own sword and glanced at its sharp blade with a faint smile.

"Not that carving you up day after day has not been enjoyable, dear sister."

Morgan smiled darkly.

"...Same here."

Mordret laughed.

"Still, aren't you a bit ashamed of yourself? It would have been all over for you a long time ago if not for the fact that Soul Reaper Jet happened to possess that neat Memory of hers, after all. Sheer luck does not exactly constitute merit, does it?"

Morgan shrugged indifferently.

"The Memory is simply a convenient opportunity. Knowing how to grasp an opportunity is a merit, too. Knowing how to create opportunities is another… you talk as if it wasn't me who recruited Soul Reaper, to begin with. In any case, I would have found another way if there was no Memory."

She had indeed harbored a few plans before Soul Reaper Jet revealed the hourglass Memory, albeit none would have been quite as effective.

Mordret looked at her with a smile.

"So, what then? Are we going to continue this charade indefinitely, dear sister? Ah… I would really hate for something as wonderful as watching you bleed to grow old."

Morgan smiled darkly.

"You are always welcome to enter my soul and challenge me to a duel there. That is the only way you will be able to kill me before I can activate the enchantment."

The best plan was to stall her brother long enough for the war to resolve itself. The second-best plan was to force him into challenging her to a soul duel.

No matter which option he chose, she won. Every outcome seemed to be in her favor.

…Why was it, then, that Morgan felt uneasy? Mordret had to be weaving some kind of scheme. Was there something she was missing?

He shook his head nonchalantly.

"I'd rather not. I have plenty of time to waste here, anyway."

Morgan's dark smile dimmed, and she looked at him coldly.

Then, she said:

"That's just it, though. I don't think you do."

Mordret raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? Are you hoping that our father can kill Ki Song swiftly? I am not convinced. So, I am willing to risk it."

She tilted her head a little and studied him for a few moments.

Then, another smile illuminated her pale face — this one faint, but sincere.

"But what if Ki Song kills our father swiftly? While you are stuck here, unable to do it yourself?"

For the first time in a while, her brother's mask of benevolent decorum cracked briefly, revealing the hideous face of hateful madness beneath.

His grin evaporated, replaced by inhuman coldness.

Mordret took a step forward and raised his sword.

"You should not say such terrible things, sister. Your sound unfilial."

Morgan grinned.

"Go die, bastard."

With that, she lunged forward.

They clashed again, like they did every day. The fury of their confrontation shook the broken mountain.

In a weird way, it was almost enjoyable. Morgan did not often receive an opportunity to cross swords with someone who was close to her in skill. But for these past few months, she could express her sword freely and without restraint. She remembered being thrilled for the first few times… each instance was a battle where her very survival was at stake, as well.

And her brother, loathsome as he might have been, was still a descendant of War. His skill was fearsome, so it would have been hard to gain so much precious experience anywhere else.

It was just that she had to experience harrowing pain, watch her body be mutilated, and taste the bitterness of defeat every time.

Just like this time.

It was so... burdensome.

Soon enough, Morgan was broken and bleeding. Her sword had collapsed into a whirlwind of scarlet sparks, and her gaze started to blur.

She was hurt quite terribly.

Drowning in her own blood, Morgan reached within and activated the enchantment of the mystical hourglass once again.

Her bloodied lips twisted into a smile.

"See you… next time."

Mordret, who was in a slightly better shape, was looking at the deep cracks leading to the depths of the shattered mountains with a thoughtful expression.

His eyes glistened strangely.

"Yes… see you next time, sister."

The world seemed to dissolve into nothingness.

A few moments later, Morgan found herself tending to a pot of fragrant stew.

She closed her eyes tiredly.

'Damn it all.'

Chapter-2080: Fragments of War (17)

Just like the children of the King of Swords were locked in a bloody stalemate, so were the two great armies.

Both the Greater and the Lesser Strongholds were refusing to fall. Despite the terrible battles that raged above the dark chasms, the Song Army stubbornly held out.

Ash and blood covered the pristine surface of the sun-bleached bone. The toll of human lives was appalling, and worst of all, the deaths of countless soldiers felt senseless — neither side had managed to gain a decisive advantage, after all, and it did not seem like that would change any time soon.

Something had to break the dreadful stalemate. The ashen-faced soldiers felt a strange tension permeate the air, as if a sudden change was coming… or maybe it was just what they hoped for.

Most people believed that the two great armies would unleash their Saints soon, changing the very nature of the siege and heralding in the final act of the harrowing war.

Sunny expected that kind of escalation, too. After all, the King of Swords, callous as he was, was also not a madman who enjoyed wasting the lives of his soldiers — each of the failed assaults on the Two Crossings had been an earnest attempt to conquer them, but now that these attempts were proving to be futile, he would have to employ a different strategy.

That was why Sunny was not surprised to receive a special order. The order was summoning him to have an audience with the King — the other Saints would probably be receiving the same summons, as well. He believed that they would be sent into the fray as a result.

If there was one strange thing about the summons, it was the location. Surprisingly, Sunny was not being called to the camp of the northern contingent of the Sword Army, where the King of Swords was supposed to be residing at the moment. It was not even the Ivory Island, which hovered above that camp.

Instead, he was being summoned to Vanishing Lake — the Citadel in the Hollows that Sunny and Nephis had conquered.

Leaving the camp of the eastern contingent of the Sword Army, Sunny traveled swiftly across the Breastbone Reach. The dire and untamed land he had once settled as the Lord of Shadows was now completely transformed.

The abominable jungle still sprawled in the hollows, but here on the surface, the scarlet infestation was no more. There was no endless sea of monstrous trees in sight, no impenetrable tangle of the vermilion vines, no red moss covering the white bone. There were no Nightmare Creatures prowling to devour prey, and no swarms of malignant vermin buzzing in the air.

Instead, the vast reaches of Godgrave was clear and pristine, with human outposts dotted here and there around the fissures in the ancient bone. There were established routes, soldiers patrolling the bone plain, and supply caravans moving across its expanse to deliver supplies.

There were even specially constructed wooden shelters raised along the routes to help the travelers wait out potential cloudbreaks in safety.

…It almost seemed like civilization.

Gliding across the vast expanse of pristine bone as a swift shadow, Sunny felt a strange sense of alienation from its unrecognizable expanse. It was a little eerie to see how drastically Godgrave had been changed by the passage of time, but also a little encouraging.

Most of all, it was full of irony. After all, this progress had only been made possible by the demands of war.

Perhaps it was no wonder that out of all the Divine Realms, the waking world seemed to have walked the path of progress the furthest.

No matter how Sunny felt about the changes that had happened to Godgrave, though, he was welcomed by a familiar sight after reaching the secondary camp of the Sword Army near the great fissure and descending into the Hollows.

There, the chilling horrors of Godgrave remained unchanged.

…Mostly.

Even the ancient, abominable jungle of the Hollows had been tamed a little — enough, at least, to establish a relatively safe pathway from the fissure to Vanishing Lake. The lake itself had been secured by the forces of the Sword Domain, as well, establishing a safe area around the Citadel.

That was only possible because the King himself had taken action, of course.

Sunny reached the charred ruins of the ancient temple without wasting any time. There, one of the Knights stationed at the Citadel guided him to a spacious underground chamber where a few other Saints were already gathered, standing around a large table with a detailed map of Godgrave.

Their faces were familiar.

Cassie was there, as well as old Saint Jest of the Dagonet clan. There was also Saint Helie, Roan of White Feather, and Rivalen of Aegis Rose… the same people who had conquered the Citadel a few months ago.

However, it was much more curious to see who wasn't there — which included the rest of the Sword Saints, and most glaringly Nephis herself.

Sunny, of course, was aware that she had not been summoned to Vanishing Lake already. After all, he was with her on the Ivory Island at that very moment.

Glancing at Cassie from behind his mask, Sunny nodded at the gathered Saints and ignored their greetings, finding a dark corner to lean on the wall nonchalantly.

[What is going on?]

Cassie, in turn, showed no outward sign of receiving his mental message.

[I am not sure. However… I think the King has some questions for you.]

After hesitating for a few moments, Sunny discreetly switched Weaver's Mask to [Definitely Not Me]. He had a feeling that only being able to lie would not work for him today.

Just as he did, the doors opened, and the familiar cold pressure descended upon them. Anvil walked into the room, his vermilion cloak fluttering behind him like a stream of blood, and approached the table with measured steps.

His heavy suit of black armor was crafted so finely that it made no noise at all.

Glancing at the map, the King of Swords turned to the dark corner where Sunny was skulking and said in an indifferent tone:

"Lord Shadow. I summoned you here because you possess the most knowledge about the Hollows among us. Take a glance at the map."

With a sigh, Sunny separated from the wall and approached the table.

The map on the table depicted Godgrave. It was quite a splendid feat of cartography, in fact, considering that it showed both the surface of the titanic skeleton and the complicated terrain of the Hollows — those parts of them that had been explored by the Sword Army, at least.

Vanishing Lake was situated in the central part of the great hollow beneath the Breastbone Reach, closer to its eastern side.

Anvil pointed to it, then moved his finger north-west.

"I want you to draw the optimal path to the Western First Rib."

Chapter-2081: Fragments of War (18)

Sunny hesitated for a few moments.

Western First Rib… was a place that held great significance to the war, at the moment.

That was, of course, because it was where the lesser of the Two Crossings was located.

There were two paths to the West Collarbone Plain — the last bastion of the Song Army in Godgrave — from the Breastbone Reach, which was now controlled entirely by the King of Swords.

The one in the north connected the titanic breastbone directly to the right collarbone of the dead deity, and was called the Greater Stronghold. However, there was a second path further south, via the right first rib. That was where the Lesser Stronghold was located, and where Sunny had spent the last few weeks.

He studied the King of Swords for a few moments.

Why would Anvil want to go there through the Hollows? It seemed like a futile endeavor. Unless…

Sunny spoke evenly:

"The optimal path depends on who is meant to walk it."

His impassive voice resounded in the underground chamber like a sinister promise.

Anvil answered him calmly:

"Saints first. Then, after a safe pathway is cleared, Awakened soldiers.

Large numbers of them."

That… could only mean one thing.

'...Crazy.'

Sunny suppressed the desire to shake his head in bewilderment.

He had expected that the King of Swords would send his Saints into battle to prevent the senseless loss of life among the Awakened soldiers — the Saints of the Sword Army had already proven their superiority, after all. And although each of them was more valuable to the power of the Sovereign than countless warriors of lesser Ranks, continuing the siege seemed pointless otherwise.

However, Anvil had a different plan.

He seemed to want to march the Awakened soldiers across the Hollows, cross from the breastbone of the dead deity to the titanic first rib beneath the surface, and bypass the Lesses Stronghold entirely — perhaps to attack it from the rear, perhaps to invade West Collarbone Plain directly.

It was a daring maneuver, and one that could work… if not for the fact that marching Awakened warriors through the Hollows was similar to giving them a death sentence. The Hollows were just too dangerous for anyone weaker than a Saint to survive.

No, even Saints could easily die here.

On the other hand… it was not entirely impossible. After all, Seishan had led her entire expedition force below the surface to conquer the Collarbone Citadel. However, she had done it out of necessity, having been left with no other choice. Even then, too many of Rain's comrades had perished during the relatively short march to the Citadel.

The great Hollow beneath the Breastbone Reach was much more vast, and much more dangerous as well. Worse than that, the distance between Vanishing Lake and the potential crossing to the First Rib was many times greater than what Seishan and her soldiers had traversed.

However…

Anvil had not asked Sunny to list all the reasons why this idea was crazy. He had simply asked him to point out the best possible route.

Crazy plans worked, sometimes. Sunny, of all people, had no right to say otherwise.

It was just that he had to, this time.

He sighed, then shook his head.

"It won't work."

The King of Swords simply considered him in silence.

Eventually, it was Jest who spoke, chuckling quietly.

"Goodness gracious, is the indomitable Lord of Shadows actually wary of something?"

Sunny stared at him from behind his mask for a few moments, then spoke impassively:

"I am. We can cleave through the jungle, slaughter the ancient horrors populating it, and even eradicate the Great Nightmare Creatures that haunt this land. However, the problem lies here."

He pointed to a particular point on the map — one that did not lay directly in the path leading to the Western First Rib, but was somewhat close to it.

"Here, the jungle hides the ruins of a sprawling city. I've been to these ruins once, and had to escape. They are guarded by a swarm of especially lethal Great abominations — not just solitary predators, but a small army of them."

His words caused a heavy silence to settle in the chamber. Over the months of fighting in Godgrave, the Saints of both armies had somewhat grown used to the idea of facing Great Nightmare Creatures in battle. Rare as encounters with such terrifying beings had been in the past, they were not something that Transcendent

warriors of humanity could not win.

But fighting a group of Great Nightmare Creatures, let alone a large one, still seemed like outright suicide.

Sunny took a deep breath.

"Much worse than that, they are able to exist as a group because these Great abominations are not independent beings. Instead, they serve a Cursed Tyrant… whose name is Condemnation. Condemnation dwells in the ruins, and its sphere of influence overlaps with any viable route to the First Rib."

The already heavy silence had turned grave.

Until it was broken by Saint Jest, who chuckled once again. Only, this time, his chuckle seemed a little nervous.

"Condemnation, is it? Why, there's definitely a dirty joke somewhere here. Well, maybe joke is too strong of a word… but a dirty pun, definitely!"

He opened his mouth to share said pun, but grew quiet after Anvil glanced at him without any amusement.

The old man coughed.

"Or, you know, maybe there isn't. For once."

The King of Swords looked away from Jest and turned his heavy attention back to Sunny.

"There is no other route?"

Sunny slowly shook his head.

"There are ones that are much longer. They would take us into the hunting grounds of other Cursed Ones, though… perhaps not as terrifying as Condemnation, but the added length of the journey would make up for the difference."

Anvil looked at the map calmly.

"A Cursed Tyrant…"

He remained silent for a while, and then shrugged indifferently.

"Then we will kill Condemnation."

Sensing the shock his words caused to the gathered Saints, he looked at them calmly.

"I will lead the subjugation force myself. And cut this creature down myself, as well."

Chapter-2082: Fragments of War (19)

The Hollows felt different in the company of a Sovereign.

Before, Sunny had always felt like prey here. Despite the fact that his powers were enough to survive the perils of the ancient jungle, it had always been a losing fight — he could slay some predators and escape others, but only for so long. The Hollows themselves were like a hungry beast, and were bound to devour him sooner or later.

But now that he was following the King of Swords, things were different.

It was not even a matter of raw power, but more so a feeling. The chilling sensation of being alone and alien to the foreign, hostile, and malevolent land that intended to consume him was replaced by the sensation of belonging. Of being the predator instead of prey… of being the master of this dark place.

Or rather, of being a follower of its master.

Examining the subtle feeling with curiosity, Sunny smiled behind the mask.

He wondered if that was what being a minion of a Tyrant felt like.

The small group was traversing the Hollows swiftly. They had left Vanishing Lake the previous day and delved into the jungle without wasting any time.

The King of Swords was riding a fearsome stallion forged from black steel — an artificial Echo of unknown Rank and Class that he had probably forged himself. Considering how the Echo looked, Sunny could not help but imagine Nightmare tearing it apart with his

adamantine fangs… after all, the world was too small for two tenebrous steeds.

Saint Rivalen had assumed his Transcendent form and was barreling through the jungle behind the Sovereign. The enormous rhino was surrounded by an invisible field of interlocked shields and carried two figures on his back — they were Jest and Cassie, one holding onto his cane, the other onto the hilt of the Quiet Dancer.

Roan had transformed into the giant white lion, running to the side of Rivalen. His wings were folded, but he was still maintaining astonishing speed. Saint Helie was galloping on the other side of the rhino, her hair dancing in the air.

Sunny, meanwhile, had turned into four shadows and hid himself inside Cassie's, allowing himself to be carried with her. Needless to say, out of everyone in the group, he was traveling with the most comfort.

It was both strange and amusing, to be so relaxed and comfortable in the Hollows.

The Hollows had not become any less deadly, after all. Now that the Sword Domain had spread across the Breastbone Reach, all of its surface belonged to Anvil — there, his authority was undisputed, and his power was at its peak.

That authority reached into the Hollows, as well. Apart from the hunting grounds of the Cursed Ones and of the Great Nightmare Creatures of higher Ranks, the vast expanse of the ancient jungle was now permeated by his will. However, that did not magically eliminate countless abominations dwelling under its canopy, and neither did it pacify the jungle itself.

Sunny did not have to concern himself with protecting the party, though.

As they moved swiftly through the jungle, the small group was surrounded by a quiet rustle. That was the sound of countless swords flowing like a river around them, all controlled by the will of their King. The sword scared many inhabitants of the jungle away and

easily obliterated those Nightmare Creatures that were too fearless for their own good.

Sunny was using shadow sense to perceive the surroundings, so he could observe the quiet river of flying swords closely.

What he saw left him disturbed and uneasy.

He had known that Anvil was a being of daunting power, of course. The sight of countless swords blotting out the sky like a swirling cloud of sharp steel was still fresh in his mind. The sight of them raining down to annihilate a horde of Nightmare Creatures was, as well.

However, it was only now that he saw the true horror of the Sovereign's swords.

They could cut down powerful abominations in mere moments, true.

But they could also cut down things that no one was supposed to be able to cut.

For example…

As Sunny observed, a field of vermilion flowers swayed in an intangible wind, expelling a cloud of red pollen. That same eerie wind carried the pollen toward the approaching humans, but before it could reach it, a single sword flashed through the red haze, drawing a thin line in it.

In the next moment, the pollen fell to the ground like dust, the vibrant scarlet color fading into dull brown. It looked inert and withered… dead.

Obviously, it was impossible to cut down a cloud of pollen, so how had the King of Swords destroyed it with a single slash?

As Sunny observed many similar events happening around them, he came to a disturbing conclusion.

It was not that Anvil's sword had cut down a cloud. Instead, it seemed to have cut… the very concept of the red pollen, thus

destroying its material manifestation.

Such power was a step above what Sunny was capable of, knew how to defend himself from, or could understand. It was a frightening display of potency that seemed more divine than mundane.

'...Troubling.'

Sunny wondered if Anvil was able to perform such feats because they were currently within his Domain, or if he could accomplish the same anywhere, anytime, simply by virtue of possessing Supreme power.

Someone else would have rejoiced to serve such a fearsome monarch, but since Sunny was actively planning to kill the king, he was not too happy to see how deadly his target was.

[Cassie… do you see what I see?]

She lingered with the response, then spoke in his mind neutrally:

[That's quite an unfortunate bit of wording, isn't it?]

Sunny shifted awkwardly within her shadow.

[Ah… r—right. Sorry.]

She chuckled quietly, then added in a somber tone:

[But yes. I do. It is a bit terrifying.]

Sunny listened to the quiet rustle of countless swords for a few moments more.

[Be sure to share the memory of this journey with Nephis when we return. She will find it useful.]

Sunny and Nephis had hoped that observing Great Nightmare Creatures in the Sovereigns do battle would give them clues about what it meant to be Supreme — and therefore how to attain Supremacy.

Without achieving that…

Right now, the gap between them and the Sovereigns seemed terribly vast.

Chapter-2083: Fragments of War (20)

Sunny would have loved to think that the senseless slaughter at the Two Crossings had been put on hold while Anvil was secretly realizing his daring plan to lead an army through the Hollows, but in fact, the opposite was true.

There had to be mayhem and carnage to cover up his absence and mask the signs of the dreadful battle with Condemnation, after all. So, the war entered a period of demented intensity while the King was absent from the frontline.

So, it was good that it did not take them long to reach the overgrown ruins of an ancient city where Sunny and Nephis had once rescued Tamar of Sorrow and her friend Fleur.

The King of Swords and his retinue of Saints were currently observing the ruins from a small distance. The Cursed Tyrant was hidden out of sight, but Sunny could feel its profane influence permeating the air.

He could practically see the Sword Domain clashing against the boundary of Condemnation's territory — only to recede like a wave, powerless to usurp the will of Condemnation.

Out there in the ruins, even the authority of a Sovereign would have to bow to a more tyrannical presence.

The man himself was standing just a few steps away from Sunny, observing the ruined city with an indifferent expression. That expression had not left his face ever since they entered the Hollows, making it seem as if nothing here was worthy of making his heart stir.

It was to the point that Sunny was starting to wonder if Anvil usually

ate Cursed Tyrants for breakfast.

Actually, it was hard to imagine Anvil eating any kind of breakfast. Did Sovereigns even need to eat? Their souls were far beyond the concept of mundane, and their bodies were not quite mortal either. So, he was not sure.

He was also painfully aware that it was his first time being so close to the King of Swords while surrounded by so few people. The small size of the subjugation party made Anvil seem almost… approachable.

'Well, what the hell? You only live once.'

Sunny decided to just go ahead and ask.

He turned his mask toward the King of Swords and spoke in a cold tone:

"Have you slain a Cursed Tyrant before, Your Majesty?"

Anvil regarded the ruins for a few more moments, then slowly shook his head.

"I've slain a few Cursed Nightmare Creatures, but none of that Class."

Sunny stared.

'...Then why the hell are you so calm?'

They were about to attack the lair of a Cursed Tyrant. A Cursed Tyrant! Condemnation was not just some big abomination — it was a true deity. A deity that had succumbed to Corruption.

They were intending to slay a god.

The rest of the Saints shifted uncomfortably. Sunny gave them a glance.

They were… a strange group, considering the circumstances.

He understood that Anvil could not pull too many Saints from the frontline without making their absence too noticeable. However, the

particular people he had taken with him were all a bit odd of a choice.

Sunny was the most obvious pick, since he had extensive knowledge of the Hollows and had already faced Condemnation once. However… he was also known to be unusually partial to Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan, who was currently in a strained relationship with the King.

There was Cassie, as well. She was a loyal follower of Nephis, too… not that it prevented her from being in very good standing among the Saints of Valor. But it was still strange to see her here, since the blind seer was not exactly known as a powerful combatant. Bringing her to a battle with a Cursed Tyrant did not make a lot of sense.

Saint Helie was with them, too… she was a warrior of great renown and well-liked in the Sword Domain, so it was not too strange to see her here. However, the King had just executed her uncle, Orum, not too long ago. Was he really relying on Helie as a champion, or keeping her close to observe her?

Then, there was Roan of White Feather. Unlike the other three Saints, there was nothing controversial about Roan… at first glance. But he was married to Saint Tyris, who was the cornerstone of the entire Sword Army here in Godgrave. Before that, their clan had not been looked upon with favor. One could almost imagine that Anvil was using Roan as a hostage to keep Sky Tide in check.

Saint Jest, meanwhile, was one of the most loyal subjects of the royal clan. Even now that the Citadel of the Dagonet clan had been destroyed, he was valued by the King greatly. However, his Aspect mostly dealt with emotions and thoughts. Considering that they would be fighting mindless automatons in the ruins, the old man would find it hard to contribute to the battle in a meaningful manner.

Finally, there was Rivalen of Aegis Rose…

Actually, Sunny could not think of anything odd about Saint Rivalen. That guy was a perfectly fitting choice. His loyalty was stellar, and his Aspect was uniquely useful in almost any situation.

But wasn't it strange, to be the only one who was not strange when everyone else was?

Perhaps Rivalen was the most suspicious!

Sunny shook his head.

'I think my nerves are getting to me.'

He pointed to the ruins.

"In any case, as I explained before, the Great Nightmare Creatures populating these ruins are called Asuras of Condemnation. They seem to be remnants of the human civilization that once thrived in Godgrave — powerful suits of enchanted armor parasitized by Corruption. So, don't try to behead them or damage the corpses trapped inside the golems. Go for the armor itself."

Sunny lingered for a few moments, and then added tensely:

"As for Condemnation, I only know that it's huge. I ran away immediately after it appeared, and even then just barely."

Anvil gave him a curt nod and headed toward the ruins calmly.

"Leave the Tyrant to me. Today, I will be the condemned."

Chapter-2084: Fragments of War (21)

Sunny had once again entered the ruins of the nameless city.

Last time, he had come here with Nephis, both of them on guard and wary of the ancient ruins.

This time, he was in a more illustrious — or maybe more deplorable — company. Led by a Sovereign, the Sword Saints strolled into the ruins with daring confidence. The source of that confidence was the King of Swords himself, whose bearing and expression remained calm and aloof despite the looming battle with a corrupted god. His brazen nonchalance was eerily infectious.

Of course, the Saints were still nervous.

Sunny was nervous, too.

Not only at the prospect of battling Great Nightmare Creatures and witnessing a clash between a Sovereign and a Cursed Tyrant, but also for a different reason.

He threw a furtive glance south.

The Nameless Temple was not that far from here — no more than two hundred kilometers. Subsequently, the swath of the abominable jungle where his menagerie of Great Nightmare Creatures were slumbering under the influence of the Dream Curse was not that far, either.

Their hideous bodies were shrouded in a veil of shadows, true, but even hiding them inside the darkness of the Shadow Realm Fragment did not put Sunny at ease when a Sovereign was so close.

In fact, the Fragment itself could attract unnecessary attention. Sunny did not know what senses Anvil possessed and how far they reached… so, he was a bit on edge.

'I… should probably focus.'

All Great Nightmare Creatures were dire enemies, but the Asuras were especially fearsome due to their special nature. He had to throw distracting thoughts out of his mind and concentrate on the upcoming battle.

The role of the Saints was to pull the attention of the Asuras away from the King and carve him a path to Condemnation. Then, they were supposed to keep the minions of the Cursed Tyrant at bay until it was destroyed.

Of course, Sunny was meant to serve as the sledgehammer of the group, doing the lion's share of the work — the other five Saints were here to support him.

That was the price he had to pay for being too outstanding.

As they entered the city, his companions grew apprehensive… except for the King, who looked indifferent to the deadly danger of the overgrown ruins.

Sunny commanded Serpent to assume the Soul Weapon form. This time, however, he did not go with the familiar odachi — considering the nature of the enemy, a blunt weapon would work much better. So, the serpentine Shadow took the shape of a great mace that seemed to be carved from black obsidian. It looked almost like the exact opposite of the diamond weapons the Asuras used.

Hoisting the heavy mace on his shoulder, Sunny took the lead and headed toward the center of the ruined city. The others followed, spreading a little to form a loose battle formation.

Each of the Saints looked formidable and battle-ready… well, except for Jest, who was wearing mundane clothes and leaning on his walking stick. The old man was looking around with curiosity.

"This place… reminds me of Europe."

Sunny glanced at him with interest.

"You've been to Europe, old man?"

That continent was lost to humanity, but unlike the Americas and Antarctica, it had not been lost to the Nightmare Spell. Instead, it had been rendered uninhabitable before it even descended.

Jest grinned.

"Sure. Where have I not been? Anyway, there are many such cities in Europe. Ancient, beautiful, swallowed by nature… quite a sight, really, albeit one that will put you in a melancholic mood. Well, and those beautiful forests are no less deadly and vile as this damned jungle. Of course, that is because of the weapons used during the Dark Times, not just the Nightmare Spell."

Sunny stared at him for a few moments, then looked away.

"Still, I don't think there's a city quite like this one in Europe."

Jest raised an eyebrow with a smile.

"How so?"

Taking a deep breath, Sunny grasped the handle of his great mace with both hands.

"There's no friendly locals…"

At that moment, the mounds of vermilion moss around them exploded, revealing damp interiors of overgrown buildings, and the lumbering figures of the Asuras lunged at them with a dreadful speed.

The appalling creatures looked just like Sunny remembered them.

They were twice as tall as humans, but shriveled and hunched. Their vaguely humanoid bodies were made from stone, with deep cracks covering its rough surface. Red moss covered the stone like tattered garments, with scarlet blossoms growing from it on black stalks.

Below the moss, desiccated flesh could be seen through the cracks in the dark stone. That flesh belonged to the Awakened warriors who had once worn the powerful suits of enchanted armor… and were now entombed within them.

The featureless faces of the Asuras gaped with round holes cut on their surface, all of them full of appalling darkness.

The terrifying abominations descended upon them in an instant, their diamond weapons already falling to shatter the world into pieces.

Sunny grimaced.

His black mace slammed into the chest of the nearest Asura with enough force to collapse a mountain, producing a devastating shockwave and causing several of the overgrown buildings to crumble.

At the same time, Rivalen staggered back on his four stubby legs, his barrier of shields collapsing under the terrible force of a Great Nightmare Creature's blow. Luckily, the invisible barrier had stalled the abomination just long enough to allow Helie to send several arrows in quick succession, each striking the Asura's chest and exploding with thunderous roars.

Roan simply used his mass to topple one of the golems, then bit down on the stone carapace. A moment later, powerful currents of electricity seemed to flow through the ancient suit of mystical armor, frying it from the inside.

Cassie simply dodged the attack, gliding back with the help of the Quiet Dancer.

The King of Swords, meanwhile…

Simply ignored the sudden attack, continuing to walk toward the center of the city with a cold and terrifying expression on his chiseled face.

Chapter-2085: Fragments of War (22)

It was never easy to fight Great Nightmare Creatures.

They were faster, stronger, and more durable than even Transcendent humans were, not to mention possessing abominable constitution. Worse than that, the world bent to their will… and the humans did, as well. Facing an abomination of the Great Rank was a treacherous ordeal at best, and a deadly mistake most of the time.

The wounds dealt to the enemy would be more shallow than they were meant to be. A sharp blade would turn dull; a sturdy armor would succumb to blows easier than it had ever succumbed before. Similarly, one's own body and mind would betray them, making the difference in power feel even greater than it was.

But it did not mean that human Saints had no chance in a battle against Great abominations. In fact, Sunny judged that even the most inexperienced Saint was far more deadly than most of those… at least as far as Nightmare Creatures of lesser Classes were concerned.

It was for a simple reason. Great Nightmare Creatures possessed dreadful power and dire will by their very nature. The Saints, however, were innately unnatural beings — they were, in fact, the product of a bitter fight against one's nature. From a mundane person to a Transcendent warrior, each step on the Path of Ascension was paid for in blood.

And only the very best of humanity had walked that far on the path. They were the strongest and deadliest members of the human tribe, trained for war by the Nightmare Spell — unlike most Nightmare Creatures, who were granted their power without having to strive to gain it.

That was why six Saints of the Sword Army were not instantly overwhelmed by the Great Nightmare Creatures of the ancient ruins.

Sunny had used shadow sense to predict where the enemy would appear from and moved in advance to make up for his lacking speed, slamming his mace into the breastplate of the appalling golem. Of course, he had wrapped himself in shadows and used [Feather of Truth] to make his blow as heavy as possible.

Most importantly, Serpent's [Slaying Blade] Ability was meant to ignore the will of greater enemies, to a degree.

As a result, the stone breastplate of the golem exploded into a rain of debris, and before the thunderous boom of the heavy impact could even die down, the Handy Bracelet announced the kill.

[You have slain a Great Beast, Asura of Condemnation.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Sunny wasted a split second to wonder at the fact that beings of such dire power could die so swiftly by his hand. Since when had it become the norm? It was truly bizarre…

But he did not have a lot of time to celebrate the kill. Already, another Asura was moving in his direction, mere moments away from obliterating him with a devastating strike.

Before it could, however, a different kind of horror intercepted the shambling golem from the darkness. Glowing red claws shot forward, and Fiend threw the creature to the ground, having already sliced off its arm with terrifying ease.

Infernal flames burned in his eyes with hungry glee.

Sunny's Supreme Devil towered above the Asuras, his glistening black frame bristling with countless jagged spikes.

Unlike the six Saints, Fiend did not look inferior to the Asuras in terms of sheer menace. If anything, he looked much more terrifying, like a demon of blackened steel that had crawled from the depths of a fiery hell. His hungry expression only made him seem more sinister.

Without wasting any time, Fiend threw himself into battle.

The other Saints were holding their ground, as well, albeit just barely. Cassie, Roan, Rivalen, and Helie coordinated their movements, facing the lumbering stone golems with a united front. Jest, meanwhile… seemed to have disappeared somewhere. Sunny felt a strange hint of concern about the old man, but he was also sure that the elder of Clan Dagonet could take care of himself.

Sunny dashed forward and brought his mace down on the moss-covered mass of the Asura whom Fiend had thrown down moments earlier. There was a shockwave, and the ground beneath the creature split open. Around them, a few ancient buildings collapsed…

The Great Beast grew still, not trying to rise anymore.

A split second later, Sunny was gone, having used Shadow Step to jump a few dozen meters away. A diamond blade whistled through the space he had been occupying a heartbeat before, seemingly cutting the fabric of reality itself apart.

He belatedly felt a cold chill running down his spine.

'That was close…'

The battle raged on, with the six Saints attracting more and more Asuras from the depths of the ruins.

But it was merely a distraction.

The true confrontation was about to happen somewhere ahead of them, where the King of Swords was walking calmly with an aloof expression on his cold face.

Out there, in the heart of the nameless city…

Condemnation was rising slowly.

Sunny felt the Tyrant before he saw its towering figure.

He felt its harrowing presence first, then shuddered as he sensed its shadow. It was vast and unfathomably deep, indescribably ancient…

inescapable.

Suddenly, he felt like a Sleeper once again, shivering from fear in the shadow of the Crimson Spire.

The rest of the Saints had sensed the Cursed Tyrant, as well. They paled and stumbled, almost losing their lives in the middle of the battle. Condemnation's mere presence seemed to have changed the world, making the Asuras stronger while humans were suddenly weak and frightened.

The only one who showed no sign of fear was Anvil of Valor.

The King continued to walk forward with measured steps, his black armor making no sound, his vermilion cloak fluttering in the powerful wind that had been raised by Condemnation.

The Cursed Tyrant was slowly rising at the heart of the ruins, making the world quake…

That was where Anvil was headed, a sharp and ominous gleam igniting in the depths of his cold, grey eyes.

Chapter-2086: Fragments of War (23)

Sunny had not gotten a good look at Condemnation the last time he visited the Ruins. Back then, he and Nephis were too preoccupied with surviving and rescuing the pair of Sleepers. Now, however… even though he was embroiled in a furious fight against the Asuras, he could not help but study the ancient Cursed One.

Condemnation was definitely one of the most imposing Nightmare Creatures he had ever encountered, if for no other reason than sheer, inconceivable size.

Sunny had seen and fought many gargantuan abominations, had even slain many of them. Some were even the size of a mountain, like Goliath or the Black Turtle whose corpse had served him as an island-ship in the Third Nightmare.

However, even Goliath had conceivable proportions, towering above the ground by more than a hundred meters, but less than two hundred.

Condemnation dwarfed the Fallen Titan effortlessly.

It was so gargantuan, in fact, that watching it rise felt like watching a natural disaster happening, not a living being moving.

At its full height, the Cursed Tyrant was no less than several kilometers tall. It was so tall, in fact, that Sunny could only see its full form because of the distance… if he was any closer, he would have had to lay down on the ground and look up to truly see the dreadful scale of Condemnation.

It was vaguely human-like in shape, possessing two legs, two arms, and a head. However, the semblance was rough and distant, as if

created in the image of a human by a consciousness that either did not really know what humans looked like, or simply did not care.

The dark behemoth was awesome and imposing, but most of all, the chaotic contours of its mountainous body were utterly dreadful. In fact, simply looking at it was maddening, as if Sunny's resilient mind was deeply wounded by the unfathomable sight.

The first time Sunny had seen the Cursed One, he assumed that, since it had risen from below the overgrown ruins, its body was covered by soil, roots, moss, pieces of rubble, and debris.

But now that he could see it clearly, he knew that he had assumed wrong. The body of Condemnation was not covered by a crumbling layer of the ruins… instead, it simply consisted of the ruins. And everything else around it, really, as if assembled from what was there to take.

Stone, soil, vast fragments of the shattered bone, countless trees and vines, pieces of stone and entire crumbling buildings were held in the air by an invisible force, comprising the colossal figure.

There were other, less tangible things constituting Condemnation, as well. The twilight of the subterranean ruin, the vast swathes of ancient shadows, the howling wind, the clouds of mist… and even more abstract concepts, most likely, which Sunny was unable to perceive.

Truthfully, he was mostly certain that he could not perceive all of the Cursed Tyrant, instead witnessing only the surface of its harrowing being.

It was as if a malevolent spirit had possessed the nameless city, and then built itself a body out of its remains.

Entranced, Sunny stared at the slowly straightening colossal figure of Condemnation for a moment or two. Then, he shuddered and looked away hurriedly, just a heartbeat before the Cursed One opened its eyes.

It was suddenly hard to breathe.

Sunny felt as if his mind was about to shatter and his body was about to fester with a vile darkness… and he wasn't even whom the Cursed Tyrant was looking at.

Towering at kilometers in height. Condemnation was unmistakably looking down… at the King of Swords, who was still approaching it with measured steps.

'This madman…'

Without slowing down even a little or showing the smallest sign of fear, Anvil stepped forward easily and suddenly soared into the air.

He did not possess the ability to fly, like Kai did, and neither was he using a Memory to take flight. Instead, it seemed as if he simply willed himself to rise into the darkness, forcing gravity to release its hold on him.

Of course, there was a simpler explanation. Sunny knew that Anvil's Dormant Ability gave him tremendous affinity to metal and the power to control it — which was how he was able to control the sea of flying swords, most likely. Meanwhile, his suit of intricate plate armor had also been forged from mystical steel, so he could have been simply exerting his power on it to fly.

In any case, the King of Swords rose high into the air and hovered there like a black dot, his vermilion cloak billowing in the wind. He was positioned right across Condemnation's colossal, inhuman face.

The two stared at each other for a few moments… from afar, it was like watching an ant stare down a giant.

But then, the situation changed.

That was because an enormous cyclone of scarlet light manifested itself into reality behind the King of Swords, drowning the ruins of the ancient city in a bright red radiance.

The cloud of scarlet light cut the world in two like an enormous wall, flowing and swirling hypnotically. It was composed of myriads of radiant sparks, of course.

The wall of scarlet radiance and the darkness surrounding Condemnation seemed to be at odds for a few moments, just like their masters were. Sunny was sure that there was also another, invisible confrontation going on.

It was the confrontation between the Sword Domain and the will of the Cursed One. Anvil was invading Condemnation's land, after all — and his Domain was invading foreign territory, too.

Then, finally, the ocean of scarlet sparks manifested into a sea of beautiful swords.

Surrounded by them like a steel stormfront, Anvil looked at the Cursed Tyrant coldly.

Then, raising a hand, he sent the sword forward.

Two enormous torrents of rustling steel flowed past him at tremendous speed, aimed at the colossal body of Condemnation.

The battle between a Sovereign and a Tyrant had begun.

Chapter-2087: Fragments of War (24)

As the storm of swords descended upon Condemnation, the Asuras seemed to lose interest in the Saints. The ancient golems turned around, observing the battle between the Sovereign and the cursed god… then, one of them raised its diamond spear and threw it with a measured, powerful swing.

There was a thunderous roar, and the ground beneath the golem cracked.

The diamond spear flew through the darkness like a shooting star, becoming incandescent and igniting the very air around it. Its fiery trail was like a wound left on the dim twilight of the Hollows.

It was aimed at the back of the King of Swords, who hovered high above the ground in the distance.

Luckily, one of Helie's arrows struck the spear in the air, producing a fearsome explosion and knocking it off course. The stunning shot left the beautiful equine Saint open for a split second, though, which almost cost her her life.

Sunny manifested his three incarnations and snarled as each of them attacked one of the Asuras.

"Keep them busy!"

He was not even entirely sure why he was trying to prevent the minions of the Cursed Tyrant from attacking Anvil. Wouldn't it be better if the damned Sovereign was either killed or severely wounded in the battle?

No… probably not. With Anvil debilitated or out of the picture, there

would be no one left to contain the Queen of Worms. And once her Domain consumed the entire world, neither Sunny nor Nephis would be able to stop her.

That was the rational reason. The irrational reason, though, was that he simply did not feel right siding with the Nightmare Creatures in a battle against humans.

Sunny and his incarnations, as well as Fiend, clashed with the Asuras. The Saints abandoned caution in favor of fierce offense, too — with their combined effort, the dreadful golems were temporarily stalled.

A vast swath of the overgrown ruins was devastated by the chilling violence of their furious battle…

But the devastation could not even remotely compare to the calamity unleashed by the King of Swords and Condemnation.

At the heart of the ancient city, the colossal figure of Condemnation was finally enveloped by a storm of swords. Because of how gargantuan the Cursed Tyrant was, its movements seemed deceptively slow. With each step it took, the Hollows quaked.

The cursed god was slowly raising a hand when the flowing river of swords slammed into its body, turning into an enormous steel whirlwind.

Each of the countless blades struck Condemnation with obliterating force.

Flashes of blinding light and flowers of flame bloomed across the dark expanse of its titanic body — those were caused by kinetic energy turning into heat and light, much like what happened when the projectiles shot by the massive siege railguns hit the hordes of Nightmare Creatures under the walls at Falcon Scott.

Only these explosions were infinitely more destructive, carrying the will and essence of a Supreme being. More than that, there had barely been a few dozen railguns firing at any given moment in Falcon Scott. Here, there was a myriad of swords, all striking the Tyrant continuously.

Sunny suddenly felt a chill run down his spine.

As he watched a hurricane of light and flame swallow the titanic form of Condemnation, his eyes widened.

'Crap…'

Then, the furious forces unleashed by Anvil's attack crossed a dire threshold.

The colossal Tyrant was wreathed in flames entirely by then, with a storm of swords continuing to bombard its mountain-like figure with a daunting barrage of annihilating blows. The heat unleashed by them was so great, in fact, that the air itself seemed to ignite.

It was like a chain reaction.

The world shuddered, and then exploded with furious light. A harrowing wall of flame suddenly formed in the distance, reaching almost all the way to the dome of the Hollows. The dim twilight that had reigned here for thousands of years was instantly vanquished… and the ancient jungle covering the ruins was, too, turning to ash almost in a split second.

The nameless city was revealed from under its suffocating embrace for a brief moment, looking almost like it had before the civilization of Godgrave succumbed to the ruthless challenge of the Nightmare Spell.

It was a beautiful sight.

Then, the ancient stone itself melted, turning into rivers of incandescent lava.

The towering wall of incinerating flame rolled outward, consuming the ruins from the center outward...

There was probably a moment or two before the deadly heat reached the outskirts of the city, where the Saints were fighting the Asuras.

Sunny allowed himself a split second to witness this awesome scene of unfathomable devastation.

Then, he dashed back and shouted:

"Rivalen!"

The Saints seemed to understand his meaning, swiftly moving to stand by the enormous rhino's side. Sunny frantically looked around to see if Cassie was there, but he did not have to worry — she was, just a step or two away from him. In fact, she had probably arrived first.

Rivalen's shields managed to surround them just before a wave of unbearable heat arrived. The power of his defensive Aspect weakened the heat, the shockwave, and the flames enough to allow the Saints to endure. Fiend's wide back protected them, as well.

A couple of heartbeats later, the dome of invisible shields was swallowed entirely by the wall of flame.

The world had turned into a fiery abyss.

'Ah…'

The air itself had been burned away, so they could not breathe. Luckily, Saints could last for a while without oxygen… it was still unpleasant, though.

But they survived.

The jungle had turned to ash. The ruins melted. The air burned.

Eventually, with nothing more to feed on, the fire died down.

Sunny could see clearly once again.

Directly in front of him, Fiend's black carapace had turned incandescent. The ravenous Shadow did not seem to be in discomfort, though — instead, he was gleeful, bursting with bloodlust and vigor, as if having absorbed some of the incinerating fire into his steel body.

Further away, the Asuras were standing, surrounded by wisps of smoke. Patches of red moss that had been covering the abominable golems were gone now, burned away, revealing their true

appearance.

Beyond the Great Nightmare Creatures, the vast ruins of the ancient city… were utterly gone, having turned into a hellish landscape of ash and molten lava.

And further still…

The Cursed Tyrant, Condemnation, remained intact and undamaged.

It still bore the scar where Neph's flame had burned its body, but the harrowing conflagration summoned into the world by the hurricane of Anvil's swords did not leave even a scratch on it.

Condemnation's titanic hand was reaching forward from the billowing cloud of black smoke, as if to swat the King of Swords away like an annoying pest.

Chapter-2088: Fragments of War (25)

As the flames died down, a hurricane wind slammed into the Saints and the Asuras from behind. That was air rushing in to fill the vacuum — and bringing the overbearing smell of ash with it.

The ruins of the ancient city had turned into a fiery hellscape, and an unbearable heat singed their lungs as they breathed in. No mortal man could have survived in this incandescent purgatory, and yet, the Sword Saints did. After all, those of the Transcendent Rank were not quite mortal.

Ahead of them, the stone carapaces of the Asuras were glowing with angry red embers.

Helie dismissed her Transformation and wiped the sweat off her brow, breathing shallow breaths.

A pained grimace twisted her beautiful face.

"How are we supposed to fight them in these conditions?"

Her voice sounded weak and ghostly, since there was not enough air around them yet to carry the sound properly.

Sunny simply leaned forward, preparing to lunge at the enemies.

"What are you waiting for? Attack while their armor is still softened by the heat!"

She stared at him for a split second, then gritted her teeth and nocked an arrow on the string of her bow — which had shrunk in size greatly now that she assumed the human form once more.

The other Saints moved, as well.

…Far away, past the dark figures of the Asuras, Condemnation's hand was moments away from reaching Anvil. Rivers of swords twisted in the glowing red darkness of the incinerated wasteland, converging right in front of him like a colossal steel flower. Its epicenter was supposed to serve as a shield for the Sovereign and receive the Tyrant's blow.

Four incarnations of Sunny descended upon the Asuras, unleashing hell upon them. However, even embroiled in the deadly battle, he could not help but keep an eye on the titanic confrontation happening in the distance.

Condemnation's hand collided with the whirlwind of swords in an explosion of furious devastation. It seemed to move slowly from a distance, but there was a blinding flash when the collision happened, followed by a thunderous roar and a tremendous shockwave.

This time, the shockwave spread vertically. A few moments later, it slammed into the floor of the Hollows, as well as in their dome — the world quaked, and a net of shallow cracks appeared on the surface of the ancient bone above them.

The swirling mass of flying swords had failed to stop the cursed god's hand.

It barreled through them without ever slowing down, obliterating countless swords and sending many more flying into the distance. Shards of broken blades and streams of molten metal rained down.

Sunny could not see the blow clearly. He only saw a whirlwind of scarlet sparks surrounding the King of Swords, and then saw him plummeting down like a meteor.

He perceived what happened next with shadow sense.

Anvil failed to damage the body of the enemy, and was struck down instead. However, the Sovereign seemed to have protected himself from the blow, after all. He crashed into a river of lava, sending a great fountain of it rising into the air.

A few moments later, Anvil rose slowly to his feet, unscathed, and looked up with a dark expression. Drops of lava rolled down the black surface of his armor, not leaving even a trace on it, and he stood in the incandescent river of molten rock as if it was water.

His eyes were cold and full of dark, suffocating determination.

Outstretching a hand, he summoned another sword.

This one, however… felt different.

Its shadow was much more terrifying than the shadows of the countless blades moving above the Sovereign like a steel storm.

'What just happened?'

Sunny struggled to contend against the terrifying Asuras while trying to comprehend the awesome exchange between the King of Swords and Condemnation.

On the surface, it had seemed simple enough — a straightforward competition of their ability to exert force and unleash devastation. However, Sunny was sure that there was more going on than what met the eye.

Anvil had not just failed to cut Condemnation because the colossal body of the Cursed Tyrant was too tough, and he had not failed to block Condemnation's blow because its arm was too strong. Instead, the Sword Domain had failed to exert its dominance over the authority of the cursed god, and his will had failed to overpower the will of the enemy.

Everything else was merely a result.

Sunny's expression grew ugly behind the mask.

He was distracted from the profane battle after that, forced to concentrate on his own. As Sunny and the Sword Saints battled the shambling Asuras, they caught glimpses of the dreadful confrontation between the King of Swords and Condemnation from time to time.

Flashes of blinding light, deafening thunderclaps, and devastating

shockwaves continued to torment the world, making the Hollows quake in horrid convulsions.

The gargantuan figure of the Cursed Tyrant was hard to miss, but Anvil was too small to be seen clearly from the distance — especially in the appalling mayhem of their awesome clash. However, his presence was just as overwhelming, since even when the Sovereign himself could not be seen, the storm of swords that he had summoned was always visible.

The torrents of rustling steel that besieged Condemnation were of the same scale as the Cursed Tyrant, even towering above it at times. Moving, flowing, soaring, falling… assaulting the eldritch deity unceasingly. The swirling hurricane of swords was strangely hypnotic, and most of all, it almost looked like a living being itself.

As if the currents of sharp swords were a substitute for the King's own body.

'...What is he doing?'

It was hard for Sunny to judge, since he did not really know a lot about Anvil's actual battle prowess, but it all seemed strange. Up until now, the King of Swords seemed to have only used his Dormant Ability… an inconceivably evolved version of it, true, but nothing else.

Sunny had seen that Ability in Orum's memories. As a Sleeper, Anvil shared a deep connection to metals and could even somewhat control them, using that weak form of control to push the blade of his sword in battle and thus enhance his swordsmanship in deadly and unpredictable ways.

As an Awakened, he could control a flying sword with enough force to effectively slay Nightmare Creatures without its hilt ever touching his hand.

And as unlikely as it seemed, this vast storm of swords was just that — an extension of that same Ability. From one sword, to a dozen, to a myriad… the scope of implementation was entirely different, but the essence was precisely the same.

So, why wasn't Anvil using his other Aspect Abilities to fight Condemnation?

Sure, there was a chance that his Awakened and Ascended Abilities had nothing to do with combat, and were instead meant to be used for crafting. He was a Spellsmith, after all, so at least one of them had to be.

But there was the Transformation Ability, too. Sunny had never seen Anvil assume his Transcendent form… but if there had ever been a good time to do so, it was now.

What was the King of Swords waiting for?

Feeling confused and uneasy, Sunny frowned and studied the battlefield.

Chapter-2089: Fragments of War (26)

A quiet hiss escaped Sunny's mouth as he staggered back, barely escaping the blade of a diamond battleaxe. The Asura's movements were almost too fast to perceive, and its mind was so alien that he was struggling to fathom it with Shadow Dance.

After all, the abominable golems were not living beings in the full sense, let alone sentient. They were suits of runic armor that had been corrupted by… whatever it was that inhabited the ancient stone now, malevolent and full of sinister will.

Still, he could predict the movements of the Asuras to a certain degree by sensing the movements of their shadows. That was how Sunny was able to stay alive and destroy one Great Nightmare Creature after another.

He had slain more Asuras than the rest of the Saints combined… but the battle wasn't over.

Just like the harrowing battle between the King of Swords and Condemnation was not over, raging at the heart of the burning wasteland.

Just a split second after Sunny evaded the blow, his enemy was already raising its hands to deliver another. However, he thrust his great mace forward, striking the enemy in the chest.

A blunt weapon was not exactly meant to deliver thrusting attacks, but Sunny was not intending to deal damage with this one. Instead, he simply pushed the Asura back, using the considerable length of his mace to keep the creature at a distance.

As a result, the diamond axe whistled past his mask, never managing

to reach him.

In the next moment, a black chain struck one of the Asura's hands with terrible force and wrapped itself around it.

The chain was produced by using Shadow Manifestation, but unlike usual, it was not moving on its own — the power of manifested shadows was not sufficient to immobilize the Great Nightmare Creatures.

Instead, another incarnation of Sunny was holding the chain, using all the dire strength of a Transcendent Terror to pull the Asura's arm down. Of course, the abomination was much more powerful than Sunny… but it did not have leverage, and neither did it have enough mass to overpower him.

The chain slowed the ancient golem just long enough to create an opening.

Stepping forward, Sunny grasped the shaft of his great mace closer to the middle while pushing its butt down. As a result, he effortlessly raised it over his head…

Then strained what felt like every muscle in his body, empowering them with a generous infusion of essence, while at the same time manipulating his own weight to make it as great as possible — all to perform a picture-perfect overhead blow.

The serpentine mace fell down like a black comet and crashed into the head of the Asura, shattering it entirely. Shards of stone shot in all directions like supersonic bullets, some of them embedding themselves into the onyx surface of the Mantle.

The Great Nightmare Creature collapsed to its knees. The black mace continued downward, striking the breastplate of the ancient golem, caving it in, and destroying the ancient remains entombed within the dreadful Asura.

The destruction of the human corpse within had no meaning, but the damage done to the integrity of the runic armor was severe enough to kill the Great abomination on the spot.

…The rebound made Sunny's bones groan, and they only remained intact because of Bone Weave.

His second incarnation was already retrieving the chain and spinning around, beset by another enemy. The third was locked in a fierce struggle with an Asura who had lost both its legs, but used its hands to crawl with astonishing speed. The fourth was fighting side by side with Cassie, communicating with her mentally.

The two of them made for a surprisingly deadly duo. They understood each other effortlessly and moved like two parts of a single being. It almost felt natural to Sunny... both because group combat was an integral part of his Transcendent Battle Art and because Cassie was an almost perfect battle partner to him due to her Aspect and their shared history.

The battlefield was hectic.

Far in the distance, the clash between the Sovereign and the Tyrant was entering fever pitch, as well. Sunny tried to pay it as much attention as he could — which wasn't much — even daring to allow his shadow sense to brush against Condemnation.

The cursed god was too vast and terrifying for him to try peering deeply into its soul, but he observed Anvil closely. When the opportunity allowed, he looked at him directly, trying to fathom the essence of Supremacy from how the Sovereign fought.

What Sunny saw was both astounding and incomprehensible, leaving him no time to try deciphering its deeper meaning just yet.

The King of Swords was still only using his Dormant Aspect Ability, slowly coming undone under the harrowing attacks of Condemnation. The Cursed Tyrant used nothing but his prodigious body to obliterate the flying swords and pursue the King, moving like an unholy mountain made of soil, bone, twilight, and malignant will.

As time went on, more pieces of the world seemed to assimilate into its titanic figure, which was now partially composed of lava, billowing clouds of ash, vacuum, and frozen flames as well.

Condemnation was not using anything except its hands and tyrannic will to attack Anvil… anything that Sunny could perceive, at least. However, he could sense that there was another layer to the battle between the King and the Tyrant, one happening beyond the boundaries of the material world.

The Tyrant was relentless and inevitable. The Sovereign… remained calm and aloof despite being hopelessly outmatched by his foe.

'He's planning something.'

Sunny did not know why he thought that, but he was sure of it — perhaps because he would have had some sort of hidden plan ready himself.

But what was it?

He studied the distant carnage of the profane battle closer, trying to notice something that he had missed.

The clash between the two terrifying beings was not easy to observe, let alone comprehend, and yet he was reasonably sure that he did not overlook anything important.

It was just that…

His four pairs of eyes widened slightly.

That was because Sunny finally saw it — a subtle pattern to the currents of the storm of swords.

Perhaps he had only noticed it because of how proficient he was in recognizing patterns as a weaver.

'What is he…'

The torrents of flying swords, which had been enveloping Condemnation like a colossal whirlwind of steel, were now more spread out. Countless swords had already been destroyed, and many were flung away by the dire forces of the deific battle.

Those swords were not drifting in the air aimlessly, however, and

neither had they escaped the King's control.

Instead, they remained static above the battlefield, not moving even a centimeter — almost as if placed in their positions deliberately.

Forming the anchors of a vast, intricate array.

Chapter-2090: Fragments of War (27)

There was no mistaking it…

Sunny had made it one of his life's great pursuits to learn how to see logic in the seemingly irrational, mind-boggling complexity of spellweaves. Therefore, his mind was trained to see purposeful patterns where seemingly only chaos existed.

That was why he was able to recognize the subtle intent in the swirling currents of the storm of swords.

The flying swords were slowly forming a vast array above the battlefield, hanging above Condemnation like a net.

But what, exactly, was that array meant to achieve, and how?

Sunny studied it for a moment.

'It's… sorcery.'

His eyes widened.

He had been wondering why Anvil was only using his Dormant Ability. Now, the answer seemed obvious… it was because he was intending to use sorcery to deliver the fatal blow, not the power of his Aspect.

The patterns created by the flying swords — each serving as a conduit of the Sovereign's essence — were not random. Once Sunny understood the nature of the array, he was able to shift his perspective and recognize them for what they were.

They were the half-assembled frames of enormous runes.

These runes were not written with ink on paper, carved into the stone, and woven out of ethereal light. Instead, they were formed by countless rustling swords, written in the glowing red darkness by sharp steel.

More than that, the runic array was not formed on a flat plain, but instead constructed in a three-dimensional space. That, naturally, was very different from how humans usually wrote, and were therefore accustomed to reading. However, Sunny was a weaver, and he had already experienced the frustrating headache of teaching his mind to perceive intricate three-dimensional constructs.

After all, the tapestries of essence strings he usually dealt with were never flat, either.

'Runic sorcery.'

Sunny was not proficient enough in that type of sorcery to understand the purpose of the array, but he could discern its existence, at least.

[Cassie… do you see it?]

Now that he was paying attention to the storm of swords, Cassie would have noticed where his focus was aimed at, as well. And she was far more knowledgeable about runic sorcery than he was.

There were a few moments of silence as both of them fought against the Asuras desperately.

Then, her mental response resounded in his mind, sounding out-of-breath:

[By the dead gods, what the hell is…]

It was a bit funny, really. She was speaking telepathically, and her mind did not possess lungs. Why was she out of breath?

Cassie paused for a moment, and then added:

[I see it. I've never seen anything like it. It's… some kind of magical prism. A prismatic confluence? A fulcrum? I'm not sure.]

That explanation did not tell Sunny much. He gathered that the runic array was meant to channel and focus something — much like a prism would focus light. But what was it that the King of Swords was intending to channel? Sunny did not know.

He was going to find out soon, though, because the runic array seemed to be almost finished.

As Condemnation stepped into a lake of lava, making it spill out of its shores, Anvil soared into the air in a whirlwind of scarlet sparks. More swords manifested themselves behind him, fanned like a steel halo. One, two, three… six of them, all emanating a sense of dire power.

Added with the terrifying sword he was holding in his hand, that was seven of them.

The six swords shot in different directions, while the seventh remained in his grasp.

The Cursed Tyrant's titanic hand once again surged forward, and the torrents of swords once again tried to stall its obliterating blow… only to be effortlessly shattered and pierced.

The cursed god was moving much faster than a creature of its immeasurable size was supposed to move. Not because its speed was so great, but simply because space itself twisted around it, shrinking and extending to allow the dark deity to pass.

There was another blinding flash, and another wave of incinerating heat. Another shockwave slammed into the dome of the Hollows, sending jagged shards of bone plummeting from a great height.

Anvil was once again struck down.

He fell into the lake of lava, this time taking a little longer to stand up.

His fearsome defenses finally seemed to reach their limit. The vermilion cloak that hung on his shoulders was scorched, and his black armor was dented. Most shockingly of all, two thin streams of blood were flowing out of his nostrils, crimson drops falling down

and evaporating in the scorching heat.

Nevertheless, the Sovereign just smiled coldly.

Because just at that moment, the runic array was finally complete.

The flying swords that formed the steel storm all happened to be just in the right place for a short, carefully chosen moment, outlining countless immense runes in the air around Condemnation.

The Cursed Tyrant finally seemed to sense the trap, but it was already too late — since the array only assembled itself a split second prior, there was no time to react.

The cursed god silently turned its head and looked up, a hint of a strange emotion appearing in its inhuman eyes.

Then, the flying swords ignited with a cold radiance, and far below them, Anvil grasped his sword with both hands to deliver an upward slash.

That slash was both swift and deliberate, beautifully lethal… but it was futile and insignificant at the same time, having cut nothing but air.

And yet…

The runic array seemed to exist for that one slash only.

Sunny did not know what Anvil had channeled with the help of sorcery — if it was merely his soul essence, the authority of his Domain, or even his sheer will. All he knew was that the runic array was brought to life by something, somehow infusing the slash of the King's sword with truly harrowing power.

It was as if an endless invisible blade slashed the world following the path of his steel sword, cutting the world apart.

The lake of lava was cut in half, and the invisible blade continued to travel upward, toward Condemnation's titanic body.

However…

Condemnation was a Cursed Tyrant, after all. Submitting to its will, space twisted once again and started to move the malevolent deity out of the path of Anvil's inconceivable cut…

Until space itself was cut, as well.

The Tyrant did not manage to avoid the invisible blade completely, but it did manage to avoid being wounded by it too severely.

All Anvil managed to cut was Condemnation's wrist. This time, the Cursed Tyrant did not escape unscathed — its arm was cut deeply, almost severing one of its hands.

Sunny froze.

The vast runic array dimmed, having exhausted all its power.

And the cursed god was still alive.

It was wounded, but not at all seriously.

'Is that… all?'

He turned his attention to Anvil, wanting to see if the King of Swords was dismayed and rattled by his failure.

But he was not.

The Sovereign was simply standing in the lava, looking up with a darkly satisfied expression.

And his invisible blade…

Did not dissipate after missing the titanic body of Condemnation, continuing to travel upward.

Chapter-2091: Fragments of War (28)

The battle between the King of Swords and Condemnation was like a cataclysm. The abominable jungle covering the ruins of the ancient city had been incinerated; the ruins themselves had melted into rivers of lava, turning the entire area into a burning hellscape.

However, the destruction did not stop there. The ground itself was annihilated, revealing the surface of the white bone below — the bone, in turn, was now covered by a web of jagged cracks.

Similarly, the dome of the Hollows far above was damaged, as well.

And the invisible blade created by Anvil — the obliterating manifestation of his authority and slaying will — reached the dome moments after cutting the lake of lava in half and delivering a wound to the Cursed Tyrant.

Sunny froze for a split second, staring into the distance with wide eyes.

In the next second, the invisible blade struck the cracked dome of the Hollows with absolute, unyielding force.

A subtle tremor spread through the ground beneath their feet.

There was an indescribable sound that washed over them like a wave, and colossal shards of bone, some of them the size of stadiums, rained down from the dark heights.

A portion of the dome shuddered and collapsed, a jagged fissure cut through it by the invisible blade.

A soft light poured into the fissure, illuminating the titanic figure of

Condemnation. Out there in the distance, the angry red darkness dissolved into the gentle radiance, chased away by light… and bathed in it, the Cursed Tyrant was revealed in all its profane glory.

But Anvil's blow had not exhausted itself, yet.

It was more than a physical cut — or even a sorcerous attack infused with the furious power of Supreme soul essence. The invisible blade was like a law created in an instant, and only meant to exist for an instant.

But in that instant, the law of the blade had the power to sever the world.

And it did.

After breaking through the damaged dome of the Hollows, the invisible blade cut the very sky above Godgrave, leaving a narrow wound on it.

The sky would not be destroyed by a mere cut, of course.

However… the veil of clouds protecting Godgrave from its incandescent purity was. A breach spanning a dozen kilometers appeared on it, allowing the annihilating sunlight to shine through.

To shine upon the surface of the Breastbone Reach… and through the newly torn fissure on its surface, spilling into the Hollows.

Just a heartbeat after the dome was broken, the light falling through the breach in the ancient bone changed. There was no gentle softness in it anymore. Instead, a pillar of blinding, harsh, incandescent radiance fell down…

Illuminating the heart of the molten wasteland, and the gargantuan figure of Condemnation standing right below the fissure.

Sunny gasped.

'T—this…'

A Cursed Tyrant was a god, and mortals could not contend against

gods.

However…

Even cursed gods had to bow before the might of the heavens. At least of the harrowing white heaven of Godgrave.

As the blinding sunlight fell on the colossal creature, the first thing that burst into flames was its wounded arm. Towering plumes of fire shot from the cut left by Anvil's blade on its wrist, and the flesh around it — the soil, the fragments of ruins, and the uprooted trees — started to blacken.

Condemnation let out an eerie sound that rolled across the burning wasteland and enveloped the Saints, making them stagger. Sunny withstood the voice of the cursed deity well enough, but others seemed dazed. Helie grabbed her head and let out a cry, while Roan and Rivalen collapsed to the ground. Cassie paled, but remained standing.

Far away, the Cursed Tyrant was melting in the pillar of incandescent sunlight. Burning and being reduced to ash, it collapsed time and space in on themselves, trying to escape the blinding radiance.

But there was no escape.

It was not only the soil, the stone, and the trees that were burning. Everything that comprised the immense body of Condemnation was being annihilated and reduced to ash. The twilight and shadows were vanquished, and the orange glow of the frozen flames was snuffed out. Even the lava that the cursed deity had absorbed into its body was being reduced to ash.

Before Condemnation could move, one of its legs crumbled, sending it toppling down.

The world quaked when the cursed god fell to its knees.

Kneeling as it was and trapped in the sunlight, the Cursed Tyrant resembled a mountain of flames, slowly dissolving into the blinding radiance.

Its wail penetrated Sunny's ears, making his mind reel.

The world seemed to shatter.

He understood vaguely that it was his consciousness that had shattered, and not the world. And yet, at the moment, Sunny did not know the difference.

Reality had turned into a fragmented, feverish nightmare.

He seemed to perceive the grotesque figure of Condemnation dissolving into radiant sunlight. Its colossal mass was like melting candle wax, growing smaller and smaller.

At the same time, he saw the storm of swords explode into a hurricane of scarlet sparks… only for some of those sparks to catch fire and burn in the pillar of light.

He also saw the Asuras watching as their god struggled on the threshold of death in reverent silence.

And many things that he had no words how to describe, and no capacity to understand.

'Aargh…'

Sunny shook his head, trying to gain control over his mind.

It felt like he had managed to recover from the death wail of a god fast enough… but when he finally came to his senses, the world was subtly different from how it used to be.

The desolate wasteland around them was not burning anymore. The rivers of lava had lost much of their glow, having cooled off.

The blinding pillar of sunlight had disappeared, replaced by the soft shining pouring from the jagged fissure in the dome of the Hollows.

Ash was raining from above, falling onto the unmoving figures of the Asuras.

The abominable golems were standing motionlessly like statues,

devoid of life.

And out there, in the distance…

Condemnation was gone.

The titanic body which seemed like a mountain was nowhere to be seen… all that remained was ash, absence, and giant shards of blackened bone.

Anvil was standing near the hill of ash, looking at it somberly.

His armor was dented and broken, and his face was covered in soot. The storm of swords he had summoned disappeared, and the seven terrifying blades did, as well.

However…

The Sovereign was holding a new sword in his hand, this one emanating an even more chilling aura. It was a greatsword with a beautiful flowing pattern permeating its steel, indescribably fearsome... and strangely familiar.

Looking down, Anvil studied the greatsword for a few moments, then dismissed it with a hint of dark melancholy in his cold, grey eyes.

Turning his back to the ashes of a god, the King of Swords took a step away and headed toward his Saints.

The battle was over.

Chapter-2092: Fragments of War (29)

"Crazy, crazy… that bastard killed a god… this is crazy…"

Walking through the northern siege camp of the Sword Army, Sunny — in his persona of Master Sunless — couldn't help but mumble under his nose.

The experience in the ruins of Condemnation had left a deep impression on him. More importantly than that, it was the first time he had seen a Sovereign truly exert themselves in a fight.

And what he had seen was sobering.

Witnessing how fearsome the King of Swords was… was humbling. But even more ominous than that was witnessing how helpless Anvil had been in the battle against a creature of the Cursed Rank.

In the end, the Sovereign had won by doing what humans did best — using his intelligence and the accumulated knowledge of humanity to use every resource available to him in order to slay the enemy. In that particular case, the resource he had used was the sky of Godgrave, which destroyed Condemnation in his stead.

But before that, Anvil had struggled to even damage the Cursed One, let alone slay it. His ultimate attack only managed to deal an inconsequential wound to the enemy.

Because Condemnation possessed a more overwhelming will, and because its authority was more tyrannical than that of the King of Swords.

In short, the disparity in power between the two was quite similar to the disparity Sunny and Nephis would face if they challenged the

Sovereigns as Saints.

Utter helplessness.

'Damnation.'

No, why was he even considering that scenario? Nephis had been clear when she said that attaining Supremacy was not simply their best option, but also the only acceptable option.

Because there were hundreds of millions of people being held hostage in the two Domains. If the Sovereigns were to die before she usurped the throne of war, all those people would succumb to the Nightmare Spell. There was no telling how many of them would survive to become Awakened, but the death toll would be staggering.

So there was no point in considering how to deal with Supremes as Saints, to begin with.

Sunny grimaced.

…It was just that he did not know if they would have a choice.

The war was rushing towards the grand finale. Both of them had made some progress in figuring out how to attain Supremacy, but not nearly enough to feel confident in their chances.

Granted, Sunny had felt a hint of an epiphany while watching Anvil fight Condemnation. Sadly, it had been vague and unclear, slipping out of his grasp before he could digest it.

Every Aspect was unique, so every Domain — an extension of an Aspect — was unique as well. Therefore, each Transcendent pursuing Supremacy had to find their own way of manifesting a Domain.

However, after observing Anvil, Sunny could not help but feel a chilling premonition.

It almost seemed seemed as if…

That the key to attaining Supremacy was literally willing it into existence.

'That sounds too immature. It sounds like a joke, really. The great secret of becoming a Supreme… is wishful thinking? What a joke...'

But he had sensed the tyrannical will of the King of Swords. It was apparent in his every move and action, after all, especially so during the battle against a Cursed being.

There were many subtle qualities to Anvil's will, but if Sunny was to pinpoint the most fundamental one… it was how domineering it was.

Cold, sharp, uncompromising. And most importantly of all, absolutely confident both of its rightfulness… and of its very existence.

But that was how a will great enough to reshape the world had to be, wasn't it? Sunny was not sure if intent powerful enough to force itself upon reality could be hesitant of its ability to do so.

Doubt and indecisiveness were the antithesis of will, after all.

So… was Supreme will a self-fulfilling prophecy? A concept that could only be realized if one believed in it, and grew more powerful the more absolute that belief became?

Willing their own will to exist.

'Isn't that a paradox?'

But then again, the very existence of Sovereigns was paradoxical in nature.

Sunny let out a heavy sigh.

He was not sure. His brush against an epiphany had been brief and shallow, after all.

However, he did feel like he had found another component of attaining Supremacy. He just needed to figure out how to apply it to all the other components he had found, as well as those that he was yet to find — and fit it all to his own Aspect.

His expression darkened.

Regardless of these complicated matters, one thing had become painfully clear to him after witnessing the battle between Anvil and Condemnation.

It was that he had to become stronger… as strong as he could possibly be, at the moment.

Of course, that had always been a priority — how could it not be, in the world of the Nightmare Spell? Sunny had always pursued personal power, first to survive, then for a few misguided reasons, and finally — hopefully — for a more enlightened goal.

But there had also been balance to that pursuit. Sunny had to weigh potential gains against inevitable risks when making decisions on what to do, and how to go about it.

And now, after watching the King of Swords slay a god… he knew that there could be no balance anymore. In other words, he had to do things that he had not been willing to risk before, no matter how perilous they could end up being.

'Damn it.'

Sadly, power was not something one could just randomly find laying on the floor. At his current level, Sunny's options were more than a little bit limited.

Frowning deeply, he passed by a row of tents and approached a large wooden building.

One of the ways he could exploit to gain power was weaving a shadowbound Memory of his own, and for that, he needed materials.

The building he was approaching could help him with just that — it was the hangar where the Sword Army stored various resources harvested from the corpses of the Nightmare Creatures slain by the soldiers.

He took a deep breath and tried to clear his mind of unnecessary worries.

'Let's see what we can find…'

Chapter-2093: Fragments of War (30)

The warehouse where the harvested materials were stored was built from wooden boards, which in turn had been made from lumber harvested in the scarlet jungle. It was an enormous building — it had to be — filled to the brim with the carcasses of Nightmare Creature, some of them relatively small, some of them towering like abominable hills of hide, chitin, and scales.

Godgrave was largely subjugated by now, so the two great armies did not clash with Nightmare Creature that much. The surface of the arm bones, collarbones, the breastbone, and a few ribs of the dead deity was already in human hands. The rest of the ribs, as well as the spine, the pelvis, and the femurs of the titanic skeleton were still untamed, but the soldiers had little reason to venture there.

Neither did they have many reasons to descend into the Hollows… and, of course, they stayed as far away from the harrowing skull of the dead god as possible.

In any case, that which had been unthinkable was now reality — the once-impregnable Death Zone was largely controlled by humans, while the abominable jungle that had covered its dreadful expanse was banished into the Hollows.

Humans mostly fought humans here now, not the Nightmare Creatures.

Nevertheless, the Sword Army still battled abominations from time to time. Apart from the thralls of Beastmaster, there were also the eerie creatures that dwelled in the ash on the bottom of the chasms of the Two Crossings and occasionally crawled to the surface, attracted by the smell of human blood. So, the material storage was never empty.

The warehouse was roughly separated into three areas — the ground floor where the unprocessed carcasses were stored, the vast storage for the processed materials, and the butchery, where the meat of the slain abominations was being harvested to be delivered to the army brigades later.

Sunny inhaled deeply, thinking that there was a plus side to being a part of the Sword Army. There was a similar warehouse in the camp of the Song Army, no doubt… but the smell there had to be terrible. Clan Valor had become known for its mastery of runic sorcery, though, and there were runic enchantments in place here to keep the air fresh.

Whistling quietly, he headed for the ground floor to check if any useful carcasses had been dragged to the warehouse since the last time he visited. There was a particular creature he was interested in, an ash dweller whom he had seen being slain from afar while taking a walk along the edges of the Ivory Tower with Nephis.

The material storage was usually full of people, and today was no different. However, the atmosphere inside seemed unusual.

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

'What is this…'

It was as though the light was a little brighter, and the air was a little fresher, with a faint scent of rain and lightning permeating it. The workers processing the remains of the Nightmare Creatures were moving a little stiffly, a hint of reverence in the eyes.

In the next moment, he saw a familiar figure and realized the reason for this strangeness.

Saint Tyris of the White Feather clan was standing just a few meters away from him, studying the carcasses.

The soft light of luminous Memories was reflecting from her golden hair, and a beautiful white cloak shrouded her graceful figure. A few Awakened warriors of her clan, as well as two Knights of Valor, were just a couple steps behind her — considering how important for the

war effort Sky Tide was, she was not allowed to go anywhere without a retinue of bodyguards these days.

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then bowed respectfully.

"Saint Tyris."

She glanced at him with an aloof expression, then nodded curtly.

"Master Sunless."

He smiled politely.

"Are you here for something particular, or simply exploring the latest harvest? If it is the former, perhaps I might be of some help. I know my way around the material storage quite well."

Sky Tyde remained silent for a second or two, then sighed.

"A bit of both, I guess. We've been facing a vexing problem recently. The aerial battles are growing more intense with each assault, and defending the Ivory Island is becoming more difficult due to attrition…"

The White Feather clan possessed many Awakened warriors who specialized in aerial combat, so it was often leading the charge in the battle for the sky above the Greater Crossing. Its main task was to prevent the enemy from reaching the Ivory Island and the ranged specialists stationed there during the assaults.

Saint Tyris shook her head.

"We have slain countless winged thralls of Beastmaster. But… it is hard to destroy them completely in the air, and once they fall to the ground, the Queen simply raises them again. Thus, they return to the battle as pilgrims. Our aerial Echoes are destroyed irreversibly, though, so we are slowly losing ground. The forgemasters of Valor are trying to counteract that by crafting artificial Echoes, yet the speed with which they can create them is woefully insufficient for the task."

Her impassive face turned grim.

"So, we are losing more and more soldiers instead. I've been coming here in hopes of finding something to armor the Echoes, but it is hard. Aerial combat is demanding… the material has to be sturdy enough to withstand its intensity, but also light enough as to not burden the flyers too much. Nothing here suits our needs."

She lingered for a moment, and then added:

"We have already exhausted all other means of enhancing our forces, including requisitioning every suitable Memory from other units of the Sword Army… well, you must already be aware. Your assistant, Aiko, was very helpful in arranging the Memory exchange with the Fire Keepers. But it is not enough, and at this point, I am forced to grasp at straws."

There was a hint of cold resentment in her beautiful amber eyes.

Sunny studied the massive carcasses of slain Nightmare Creatures that surrounded them from all sides, considering her words in silence.

As he did, his expression changed subtly.

Saint Tyris was right. There was no material here suitable for crafting armor for flying Echoes…

That was not the problem, though.

His smile grew a little forced.

"If you allow me to be so presumptuous, Lady Tyris, we have an extensive material warehouse on the Ivory Island, as well. I've collected many exotic materials over the years — all over the Dream Realm, not only here in Godgrave. You might find something that suits your needs… if you wish, I can escort you there right now."

Saint Tyris turned to study him calmly.

'Say yes, say yes…'

It was an unusual offer, but not that outlandish. There was no rule preventing various forces within the Sword Army from sharing resources, after all — in fact, they all did just that, even if most kept

the best spoils for themselves.

Simple courtesy was not what had motivated Sunny to invite Sky Tide to the Ivory Island, though, and neither was it his favor toward the White Feather clan.

He had a far more urgent reason to want to get Saint Tyris out of the material storage.

It was that while Sunny was studying the carcasses of the dead Nightmare Creaturees, he had discovered…

That most of them were actually not that dead.

Chapter-2094: Fragments of War (31)

The motionless Nightmare Creatures around them were not dead…

However, they weren't really alive, either.

There was no vile darkness permeating their souls anymore, because the dead had no souls. But there was something.

A strange, almost imperceptible impression of foreign essence hidden deep within the towering carcasses, binding them like puppeteer's strings.

Sunny felt a cold chill run down his spine.

'These are… Queen's pilgrims.'

The siege of the Greater Crossing was such a bloody and arduous endeavor for many reasons, and the fearsome fortifications built by the Song Army on the other side of the chasm was merely one of them.

Terrain was another, but just as importantly, it was the issue of Domain boundaries.

The Sword Domain and the Song Domain were clashing above the dark chasm, just like the two great armies were. Anvil controlled one side of the crossing, while Ki Song controlled the other — as a result, the attacking soldiers had to leave the support of their King behind and enter the hostile Domain when assaulting the Song stronghold.

The defenders, in turn, could not freely counterattack the camp of the Sword Army, because they would have to leave the Song Domain to do so.

It was the reason why the soldiers of the Sword Army could give their fallen comrades a proper burial here in the camp instead of having to destroy the bodies immediately, and why there were not that many guards watching over the field hospital.

The Queen could not raise the dead outside the boundary of her Domain. She could not even send her pilgrims across the chasm…

Only, as it turned out, she could.

Sunny looked at the carcasses of the Nightmare Creature while hiding his apprehension.

'How the hell…'

Some of these abominations had been slain in the Hollows, while most were either Beastmaster's thralls or ash dwellers.

Or so everyone had thought.

But it was clear to Sunny now that it had all been a ploy. All Nightmare Creatures around him, except those from the Hollows, had not been slain by the soldiers of the Sword Army.

Instead, they had been slain by the enemy, raised as puppets, sent across the chasm, and then commanded to play dead after sustaining enough damage to make their supposed deaths look believable.

And now, they were all here, in the heart of the Sword Army camp, waiting… for something. While no one was the wiser.

'Which bastards?!'

For a moment, Sunny felt a searing anger. Sure… it was hard to distinguish a pilgrim from a dead body. They were genuinely dead, after all. But somebody, at least, had to note that the Spell did not announce the kill after delivering a supposedly fatal blow to these creatures.

Granted, the battlefield was a terrible and hectic place, so most soldiers did not pay a lot of attention to the whispers of the Spell during the dreadful clashes with the enemy.

'What now, then?'

Trying to maintain a polite exterior, Sunny tensed inwardly.

He felt more annoyed than troubled, but it was still an issue.

Master Sunless was supposed to be weak and harmless, so he could at best raise the alarm and reveal the insidious infiltration… but then he would have to explain how he was able to detect something that so many other people had missed.

And Sunny really did not wish to share the fact that his eyes had inherited wondrous abilities from Weaver, the Demon of Fate.

'That is not even the real problem.'

The real problem was the intention of the Queen.

Sure, a bunch of powerful pilgrims could deal some damage if they went on a rampage in the depths of the enemy camp. But in the grand scheme of things, that damage would be insignificant.

So why had she gone to such lengths to deliver her puppets to the material storage of the Sword Army?

The answer was right in front of Sunny.

It was Saint Tyris.

She said that she had been coming here regularly in search of suitable materials to armor the flying Echoes. So, her presence here was predictable, and could be exploited.

The pilgrims had not been sent here to sabotage the camp of the Sword Army.

They had been sent here to kill Sky Tide.

...Sunny had just stumbled into an assassination plot.

Which was why he had to get her out immediately — while preserving his facade of a harmless and unassuming Master Sunless.

'Wonderful.'

Noticing a hint of hesitation in Sky Tide's eyes, Sunny put on his most charming smile and said pleasantly:

"I will be happy to give you a private tour of my collection, Lady Tyris. I am sure we can discover something… worthwhile, together."

He had no idea when the pilgrims were going to attack, so there was no time to waste. Saint Tyris already expressed that her search here in the material storage had been fruitless — so, hopefully, she would take him up on his offer.

…However, to Sunny's astonishment, the reaction to his highly pragmatic suggestion was not at all what he expected.

One of the Knights of Valor standing behind Saint Tyris glared at him with contempt, and then uttered quietly through gritted teeth:

"Despicable…"

Another shook his head.

"Damn womanizer."

Hearing those words, the warriors of the White Feather clan pierced him with furious gazes and whispered among each other:

"So he wants to give our lady a private tour, huh?"

"So the rumors are true… he really is that kind of scumbag."

"I told you I saw him bothering Lady Cassia while Changing Star's was away. Ah, I really want to erase that sleazy smile off his face..."

Sunny's eyes widened.

Sky Tide's gaze, meanwhile, turned even colder than usual.

He shuddered.

"N—no… I did not mean…"

However, Sunny did not get the opportunity to finish the sentence.

Because at that moment, the pilgrims moved.

All he could do was send a mental cry to Cassie:

[Cassie! Get Nephis to the material storage in the northern camp, now!]

In the next moment, Saint Tyris shifted her gaze past him, her strange vertical pupils turning into two narrow stills.

Then, reaching forward, she grabbed Sunny by the shoulder and pulled him back.

Something crashed into the wooden floor behind him, sending splinters flying in all directions.

Sky Tide shielded Sunny from the enemy and barked:

"Ascended Sunless, escape immediately! The rest of you, prepare for battle!"

Her retinue was slow to react, still failing to understand what was happening.

But the carcasses of powerful Nightmare Creatures all around them were already moving, rising from the ground to launch an attack.

Sunny's eyes widened, and he grew pale as a ghost.

As the pilgrims lunged at Sky Tide and her bodyguards from all sides…

He fumbled for a moment, then took off running.

Sadly, in his panic, Sunny ran in the wrong direction.

Worse than that, he even managed to trip over his own feet…

And collided with Saint Tyris, sending them both flying to the ground.

Just as they landed on the wooden floor, Sunny finding himself laying atop the dazed Saint, something dark and incredibly sharp whistled above his head.

"Oh, oh gods! S—sorry!"

He awkwardly tried to extricate himself from the matriarch of the White Feather clan, but was thrown back down when something crashed into his back.

"Aargh!"

Luckily, the blow did not seem to be too powerful… the clumsy enchanter remained alive, at least. There was some blood flowing out of the wound, but not a lot of it.

Saint Tyris caught Sunny before he could fall on her… again… and unceremoniously tossed him aside, in the direction of the butchery — where there were no moving Nightmare Creatures, and he therefore had the best chance to survive.

Her sword had finally manifested itself into reality, so she instantly slashed at the giant claw flying at her, and severed it from the chitinous limb.

Her bodyguards were already holding their weapons, as well, throwing themselves into the fight.

Sadly, they were hopelessly outnumbered, and caught by surprise on top of that.

But Sunny had finished summoning a Memory too.

To the surprise of those who could see him, it was not a sword, a spear, or a weapon of any kind.

Instead, it was a beautiful silver bell.

Laying on the floor, the enchanter raised a hand and rang the bell with a horrified expression on his handsome face.

…In the next moment, the roof of the material storage exploded, and

a radiant figure plummeted into the mass of abominations like a star, surrounded by a whirlwind of white flames.

Soon after that, Knights of Valor flooded through the gate of the warehouse, having followed the mysterious, melodious ringing.

The battle was fierce, but short.

Before too long, the pilgrims of the Queen that had infiltrated the camp were completely obliterated.

***

By the end of the day, a stunning rumor spread throughout the great army of the Sword Domain.

The Queen of Worms had sent assassins to eliminate Sky Tide of White Feather… and they came dangerously close to succeeding in their vile task.

Luckily, Changing Star arrived in the nick of time to rescue Saint Tyris.

That was not the most astonishing part, though…

The most astonishing part was that the assassins only failed because of a young enchanter who had happened to be near Sky Tide at the time.

According to the workers who had witnessed the scene, Master Sunless — the Memory Purveyor of the Fire Keepers and an infamous playboy — bravely threw himself between Saint Tyris and the attacking Nightmare Creatures, shielding her with his own body from a rain of deadly blows.

His flesh was pierced, and his blood was spilled, but thanks to that, Sky Tide remained unscathed.

More than that, even while bleeding to death, the enchanter managed to raise the alarm — which was why everyone in the northern siege camp heard the melodious ringing of a bell, and why Lady Nephis managed to arrive on time.

The soldiers shuddered at the thought of what would have happened if the brave enchanter had not been there.

The loss of Saint Tyris would have been a devastating blow to the entire army. After all, it was only thanks to her that the soldiers could fight without fearing turning to ash under the merciless light of the incandescent white sky.

"Damn… I was wrong about that Sir Sunless."

"You know, it takes a rare kind of man to shield a stranger from death with his own body."

"Anyone can die uselessly, you fool… it's the fact that he managed to call for help and saved everyone that is impressive. That's a Knight Commander for you."

"I hope that mongrel is alright. Well, of course he is — Lady Nephis was there, after all."

"Oh, yes. I heard she had healed him moments before he passed away… also that the enchanted bell was her gift to him, and that she comes running every time he rings it... lucky bastard!"

The rumors continued to spread, growing more and more exaggerated with each retelling.

And that…

Was how Sunny became a hero of the Sword Army.

Chapter-2095: King and Jester

Not long after the battle with Condemnation, the King of Swords was sitting on the vast stump of an ancient tree, surrounded by the dim twilight of the Hollows. The trunk of the tree was laying nearby, splintered and shredded by countless cuts, vile juices seeping out of it onto the scarlet moss.

The trunk was hollow on the inside, and half-digested remains of dead Nightmare Creatures could be seen through the gaping holes in the bloodred wood.

Anvil was cleaning his sword with an aloof expression on his regal face.

Soon enough, there was the sound of footsteps, and Jest of Dagonet approached him from the direction of the temporary camp established by the six Saints. The dapper old man seemed undisturbed by the predatory rustle of the ancient jungle, leaning slightly on his cane.

He had disappeared for most of the battle against the Condemnation, only returning after it was slain. The Saints naturally had questions about where Jest had vanished to in the chaos, to which he simply produced several Supreme soul shards and unleashed a barrage of questionable jokes.

It seemed that he had been pulled into a buried structure by one of the Asuras, and was beset by several Great Nightmare Creatures there, unable to escape and almost drowning in lava once the ruins were destroyed.

Now, several hours later, the King and his retinue had left the desolate battlefield behind and entered the scarlet jungle once more, moving west for some time before making camp.

The old man stopped a few steps away from the Sovereign and looked at him with a curious expression.

"A new sword?"

Anvil nodded silently.

"It's Condemnation."

Saint Jest clicked his tongue and studied the dreadful blade for a few moments. Then, he shuddered and quickly shook his head.

"I presume the kids did not see?"

The King of Swords glanced at him, then shrugged.

"By the time they came to their senses, I had already turned it into a Memory."

The old man nodded.

"Good, good… well, what do I care? It's not like I am your butler. That would be that bore, Sebastian. If he's still alive."

Anvil finally looked away from the sword and gazed at Jest coldly.

After a few moments of silence, he asked in an indifferent tone:

"How was your outing?"

Saint Jest grinned.

"Well, it could have been worse. I did manage to reach the Nameless Temple during the commotion… sadly, I failed to get a good look."

The King of Swords raised an eyebrow, prompting the old man to cough in embarrassment.

"That kid, Shadow… I guess he was wary of me from the very start. I tried the Hollows approach at first, but that pretty Echo of his — or whatever that onyx lass is — was there waiting for me, hiding in the shadows. Goodness gracious, such a sight. Anyway, that thing is more or less created to be my nemesis... it's completely immune to mind

attacks. So, I did not attack and climbed to the surface instead."

He sighed.

"But there was… something… guarding the Nameless Temple above ground, as well. I could not see it, and I could not sense it. But it was there. So, I took a cursory glance and retreated."

Anvil frowned, lingered for a few moments, and then continued to clean the dreadful sword.

After a while, he asked evenly:

"And?"

Saint Jest shrugged.

"He is definitely hiding something. But what? That, I could not say."

He hesitated for a heartbeat, and then grinned.

"I mean… that much was already obvious, I guess! You know, considering the creepy mask."

Anvil glanced at him with no amusement in his steely grey eyes.

"That mask is a Divine Memory of the Seventh Tier. Well, one of them is, at least."

Saint Jest shrugged.

"Good for him. Well, anyway… I am pretty sure that he is not working for that Song girl. I am also convinced that he has nothing to do with the… third one. Whatever he is hiding, it only has to do with Immortal Flame's grandkid."

A hint of displeasure found its way into Anvil's eyes.

He studied the sharp blade of the sword, remained silent for a while, and then asked in a distant tone:

"Who do you think is the more dangerous of them?"

The old man laughed.

"The most dangerous? Personally, I think the third one is the most dangerous."

The King looked at him with a hint of curiosity.

"Song of the Fallen? Why?"

Saint Jest smiled.

"It's the quiet ones that are always the problem. And our blind beauty, Cassia, is so quiet that it's often hard to remember that she's there. Creeps me out, to be honest."

Anvil smiled faintly, then nodded.

The old man's expression changed subtly.

"Why? What do you want to do?"

The King of Swords shrugged.

"Nothing. Who says that I want to do anything?"

Saint Jest chuckled nervously.

"Yes, well… good. Doing something while we are in the key stage of the war would be unwise."

Anvil dismissed the dreadful sword and rose to his feet, looking west. There, the dome of the Hollows was sloping down, falling toward the ground. It was the boundary of the Breastbone Hollow, with a great dark fissure opening a path into the First Rib.

He shook his head.

"You don't have to worry."

With that, he turned around and headed toward the camp where the six Saints were preparing food.

Saint Jest looked at his back.

A few moments later, he said quietly:

"I am not worried. It's just… you're breaking my damn heart."

Anvil smiled slightly and answered without ever turning his head:

"Stop pretending like you have a heart, old man. You're the one who taught me how to be heartless."

Jest sighed, then shook his head and followed.

"Respect your elders, brat... I mean, my king. In any case, I have the right to be sentimental in my advanced age, don't I? I won't be around for much longer, you know... so, how about you cut me some slack..."

Anvil answered indifferently:

"You're a Saint. Your lifespan is not even comparable to that of a mundane human, so stop pretending to be frail."

Jest chuckled.

"That's true, too... no, but why are you calling me an old man, then? I'm basically in my prime! How dare you!"

The King did not respond.

Chapter-2096: Island of Peace

After Condemnation was slain and its city was reduced to a black wasteland, nothing stood in the way of the King's plan to pass below the Lesser Crossing and attack the impregnable stronghold of the Song Army from the rear.

Except for the ancient jungle itself.

The biggest threat had been eliminated, but the Hollows still remained a dark and deadly hell. The King and his Saints still had to clear a safe path for the soldiers, and that was a task of a much greater scale.

Various units of the Sword Army were secretly pulled back from both siege camps, starting to clear a subterranean pathway from Vanishing Lake to the entrance to the First Rib Hollow. No matter how fast they worked, it was still going to take them days, if not weeks, to ensure safe passage for the actual invasion force.

They were protected by the flying swords of the King, which moved like rivers above the cleared path, sometimes diving to the ground to eliminate unseen threats.

The Saints, meanwhile, were taming the surrounding jungle — hunting down ancient predators that dwelled beneath the scarlet canopy, uprooting man-eating trees, and eradicating swarms of abominable vermin.

Sunny had rarely spent such a prolonged period of time in the Hollows before, and all of it — the appalling scarlet jungle, the dim twilight of the great bone cavern, the torrents of swords flowing like torrents of steel high above — was starting to feel like a feverish nightmare.

But no matter how nightmarish the Hollows were, what was

happening on the surface seemed far more dreadful.

There, the siege of the Two Crossings continued, with tired soldiers losing more of what little sanity they had left with each passing day.

The fearsome strongholds of the Song Army had already repelled countless assaults, stubbornly refusing to fall. No matter how the tactics of the besieging army evolved, the defenders never surrendered the ramparts. No matter how terribly the fortifications were damaged, they were repaired and reinforced each time.

The white bone was painted rust-red by blood, and the losses of both armies steadily continued to mount.

The Saints were forced to play a passive role in the slaughter, since neither of the Supremes could afford to lose any more of them to the ravages of war… unless there was no other choice, at least.

Strangely enough, doing nothing was far more demoralizing than risking their lives in battle would have been.

The Two Crossing had become a purgatory.

…On one of these ominous days, Nephis returned to the Ivory Tower after receiving the report on the casualties of the latest battle. Her expression was somber, and there were cold white flames burning in her beautiful eyes.

Instead of returning to her chambers immediately, she went to a dark hall where dozens of luminous Memories burned, surrounded by solemn shadows.

These Memories belonged to the Fire Keepers, and had been left here to indicate that their masters were still alive. Once an Awakened died, their Memories were destroyed — so, every time an enchanted lantern disappeared, it most likely signified the death of one of her warriors.

There had been almost fifty luminous Memories in the hall once. But now, a handful of them were gone, extinguished forever.

Nephis spent a long time looking at the levitating lanterns, her face

motionless.

That was where Sunny found her after a while.

He glanced at the shining Memories, then walked over and placed his hands on her shoulders, massaging them gently.

"How bad were the casualties yesterday?"

Nephis let out a heavy sigh, then raised her hand and placed it on one of his own.

"As bad as we expected."

She lingered for a while, looking at the lanterns.

"...You know, there were more than a thousand people living in the Dark City before I came there."

Her voice grew a little lower.

"But by the time I was done with it, there were only a hundred."

And now, there were a few less.

Sunny was not sure if she was reminiscing about the fate of the Dreamer Army and the burden of leadership she had taken upon on the Forgotten Shore, or the responsibility for the Sword Army — and the Song Army, really — she was carrying at the moment. Perhaps it was both, and the parallel between the two.

Her shoulders were strong, but even Nephis felt oppressed by the weight of it all, sometimes.

Who wouldn't?

He embraced her from behind.

"There would have been none left without you."

And there would not be, perhaps.

Nephis leaned back a little and sighed.

"I know. But it doesn't make it easy."

Sunny remained still for a while, holding her softly, then drew away and smiled.

"Come. I prepared dinner, and it is waiting for you impatiently."

The dishes he had prepared were all her favorites, of course… not that Nephis was very passionate about food. Still, that indifference of hers was slowly succumbing under his influence, so recently, she had been showing glimpses of enthusiasm about this and that.

Sunny led Nephis to the highest level of the Ivory Tower, where a scrumptious dinner was set out beautifully on the wooden table. They enjoyed it in an atmosphere that was not quite peaceful, considering the misery of the siege camp below, but close to it.

Despite everything, they made an effort not to discuss the war. That was somewhat of an unspoken rule instituted by Sunny — he did not want them to be the kind of people who could only talk about pragmatic matters, so they simply chatted about whatever came to their minds during the meals.

After all, Master Sunless was supposed to be Neph's small island of peace in the tumultuous waters of her dire life. If he could give her a few short moments of respite from the strenuous burdens she carried, then his job was done.

Which was why what he was about to tell her was hard to say.

Once they finished dinner, Sunny looked at Nephis, hesitated for a few moments, and then sighed.

"...I have to leave, for a short while."

Chapter-2097: Checklist

Nephis remained silent for a while, studying him calmly. Then, she raised an eyebrow.

"Leave?"

Sunny leaned back and sighed.

After collecting his thoughts, he spoke in a neutral tone:

"What happened in the Hollows… really put things in perspective, for me. Not only how fearsome the King of Swords is, but also how great the gap between the higher Ranks is. So, for the first time in a long while, I am craving power once again."

Nephis frowned, seemingly reluctant to let him go. Sunny did not know if that reluctance was merely his imagination, but he felt strangely uplifted by the idea that she was displeased at the idea of parting with him, even if it was for a short time.

"There are a couple of flaws in your reasoning. Firstly, it doesn't matter how great the distance between the Ranks is, because we… I… will confront the Sovereigns after attaining Supremacy myself. Secondly, you and I are different from the King of Swords, the Queen of Worms, and the other one. Because we are divine."

She meant their Divine Aspects, of course. Sunny had not made it secret that he, too, possessed one of those — in fact, he had not really needed to reveal it to Nephis. She had more or less figured it out on her own.

The Divine Aspects bestowed far greater potential on an Awakened, and both Sunny and Nephis had undergone countless ordeals and tribulations to realize that potential. They were also no mere Beasts, while Anvil, despite being a Supreme, still only possessed one soul

core — that as well had contributed to the disparity between him and Condemnation.

There was some truth to her words.

Sunny smiled faintly.

"Plans go awry all the time, so there is no guarantee that our desire to attain Supremacy will be fulfilled in time. As for our divine powers… when has raw power ever been the deciding factor in anything? Both of us have made our living from slaying beings stronger than ourselves. I am reluctant to find myself on the opposite side of this equation."

Nephis suddenly chuckled.

"And, therefore, you want… to search for more power?"

He raised his hands and shrugged.

"What can I say, I'm a complicated man. At least I will be able to tell myself that I've done everything I could when I die."

She remained silent for a few moments, then nodded.

"So, where are you going to search for power?"

Sunny looked around the spacious, sunlit expanse of her chamber and lingered with the answer.

Eventually, he said simply:

"The Shadow Realm."

Nephis seemed startled for a moment.

"The… the realm of Shadow God?"

He smiled.

"Yes. Where else would a shadow like me go to find something like that?"

Then, Sunny sighed.

"To be honest, now that the final chapter of the war is approaching, I can't help but feel… incomplete. Because I've never managed to form my Titan Core. It is not that significant, in the greater scheme of things, true. But I am compelled to try."

He did not mention that it would be extremely dangerous… there was no need to. Danger was a given.

Nephis studied him for a while, then asked with a hint of hesitation in her voice:

"Why you? This you, I mean. You've… never used Master Sunless for such tasks."

Sunny smiled bitterly.

If he could, he would have allowed the humble shopkeeper… who had somehow managed to become a widely renowned Knight Commander of the Sword Army in the meantime… to stay away from anything having to do with combat and bloodshed. But he had little choice.

"What else can I do? The Lord of Shadows is in the Hollows, being watched closely by a Sovereign. I don't dare pull any of my incarnations away from there. The incarnation in the camp of the Song Army can't leave its post. I, however, am both available and known for locking myself in the basement for days on end. So, this is the best choice."

Nephis looked down, displeased.

Eventually, though, she sighed.

"Makes sense."

A few moments later, she looked at him again and asked:

"When are you leaving, then?"

Time was of the essence, so Sunny saw no reason to waste it.

He shrugged.

"Now."

She studied him silently for a while.

Then, Nephis leaned forward and smiled a little.

"How about leaving after breakfast?"

Sunny frowned.

"But we just had dinner."

Then, his expression changed.

"Oh."

And then changed some more.

"Sure. That's a great idea, as well…"

***

In the morning, Sunny gave a few instructions to Aiko and retreated into the basement of the Brilliant Emporium.

Once there, he made a few last preparations and steeled himself for battle.

The memory of having his chest pierced by an arrow soured his expression, but he still resolutely dismissed the Nebulous Mantle, manifesting the Onyx Mantle instead.

…It felt strange, to wear the fearsome black armor on his original body once again. Master Sunless had only existed briefly, but Sunny had grown used to his leisurely life. That persona of his was as much of a safe harbor for him as it, hopefully, was for Nephis.

But that time had come to an end. Even if he did not delve into the Shadow Realm now, Sunny was not sure how much longer Master Sunless could continue to exist. The resolution of the war, whatever it would be, was going to change a lot of things, so his fate — or lack

thereof — was unpredictable.

After gathering his thoughts for a while, he manifested the gloomy shadow into an avatar and looked at him for a few moments.

"This… is going to hurt a lot, isn't it?"

His other self grinned darkly and answered in the same voice:

"Of course. Have you forgotten the last time?"

No, he had not forgotten. The Shadow Realm was a perilous place, and especially so for Sunny.

Out there, shadows were being disassembled into streams of essence by the Realm itself. Being a creature of flesh and bone slowed the process, somewhat, but it did not stop it.

Which meant that Sunny would be on a timer the moment he entered the Shadow Lantern. Worse than that, many of his powers would be too dangerous to use. He would not be able to use Shadow Step, build truly effective Shells, send his shadows to scout ahead, or even augment himself — or his Memories — with their power.

Ironically enough, the Shadow Realm — which was supposed to be his natural environment — put more restrictions on Sunny than the Dream Realm did.

And then there was the mysterious archer, as well.

Sunny smiled.

"Still. I can't help but feel strangely excited. We are finally going to explore a new place."

The second Sunny rolled his eyes.

"Curiosity killed the cat, you know."

Sunny nodded.

Then, he frowned.

"...What the hell is a cat?"

His other self laughed.

Perhaps it was a bit self-absorbed, to be laughing at his own jokes, but Sunny was nevertheless pleased with himself.

Raising a hand, he summoned the Shadow Lantern.

Chapter-2098: Prodigal Shadow Returns

Sunny prepared himself for battle before opening the gate of the Shadow Lantern.

He had no idea what would happen when it opened, after all. The mysterious archer had been able to send an arrow flying through the gate the last time — so, there was no guarantee that the unknown creature would not be able to escape the Shadow Realm itself if given an opportunity.

The battle could happen once Sunny passed through the Gate of Shadow, or it could happen right here, in the basement of the Brilliant Emporium. He had to be prepared either way.

Of course, there was also the possibility that nothing would happen.

A considerable amount of time had passed since Sunny's last attempt to explore the Shadow Realm. It was quite possible that the mysterious archer remained in the vicinity of the closed portal, waiting patiently for the door to open once again, but it was also possible that they had moved on.

However, Sunny highly doubted that the archer had left.

Firstly, it was because he himself would have remained in place, laying patiently in an ambush. Secondly, it was because of the nature of their first encounter.

Had the mysterious archer simply happened to be near the entrance to the Gate of Shadow when Sunny stepped through it? Perhaps. But it was far more likely that they had been waiting there on purpose, and for quite a long time — maybe having noticed the shadows Sunny used to send into the Lantern and call back at some point.

Looking at his avatar, he took a deep breath.

"If something happens, summon me back immediately."

The avatar smiled crookedly.

"Why? If I am slow to react and you happen to die out there… who knows, maybe I'll be the new original body. Wow, that sounds nice."

Sunny frowned.

"What are you talking about, bastard? If the original body is destroyed, all you shadows will become homeless. Then, the universe will evict you into the Shadow Realm, where you'll be repurposed into six pretty clouds of essence. So, don't you try anything!"

Then, he used the avatar to scoff at himself.

"Are you sure, though?"

Sunny looked at him, unamused.

"Ah, whatever. I'm tired of talking to myself."

With that, he hesitated for a few moments.

He wanted to manifest Serpent into its Soul Weapon form, but was not sure if his Shadows would be harmed by the Shadow Realm. It was a world where shadows were dissolved into pure essence, after all… even he himself would start crumbling as soon as he stepped inside, so what about his loyal minions?

'What was Shadow God even thinking…'

Why make his realm so inhospitable to his own children?

Shaking his head, Sunny manifested a shield out of the shadows populating the basement and gave his avatar one last glance before turning serious.

"I'm off."

Then, he commanded the gate of the Shadow Lantern to open, turned

into a shadow himself, and slid into the dark chasm.

A few moments later, he found himself in a familiar, beautiful, harrowing land.

Swiftly assuming a corporeal form, Sunny crouched atop a tall mound. There was a desolate expanse of dark hills stretching in front of him in all directions, covered in darkness. There was no grass, no trees, no moss, and no flowers — no sign of life at all, just stillness and silence.

The ground was covered in a soft layer of fine black dust, and above him was a pitch-black sky. There were no stars and no moon, just a seemingly endless expanse of darkness, illuminated by the beautiful silver radiance of the distant essence storms.

There in the distance, tumultuous clouds of essence moved and swirled, as if carried by ghostly winds. The radiant currents were like beautiful rivers of starlight that illuminated the desolate land, making the immense, ancient shadows populating it flow and dance.

Once again, Sunny was stunned by how breathtaking that dark sight was.

But it was also dreadful, because he could sense the destructive fury of the essence storms even from a distance. It was both daunting and eerie, making him feel the chilling touch of primal fear.

At the same time, Sunny felt a flood of spirit essence flow into his soul, and a new strength permeate his body. Here in the Shadow Realm, he was within his source element. He was more powerful here than anywhere else, despite the many restrictions placed on him by the somber nature of this land.

The shadows that surrounded him were indescribably ancient and unfathomably deep. Their tranquil, slumbering indifference made him feel calm and at peace.

But it was all an illusion.

There was no peace in this desolate realm, and no reason to feel calm.

Almost as soon as Sunny appeared, a tiny mote of light rose from his arm and slowly drifted into the sky… that was the sign of his soul slowly being undone.

He gritted his teeth.

His visit to the Shadow Realm would be a race. The longer he remained here, the more shadow fragments he would lose — and if he lingered for too long, his soul might very well collapse entirely. So, his task was to absorb fragments faster than he was losing them.

And to do so, he had to find something to kill.

Which promised to be a dire task. After all, Sunny was stripped of most of his powers at the moment, all alone and lacking knowledge.

Dark arrows could start flying at him from the shadows at any moment.

…But they didn't.

In fact, when Sunny looked around, he realized that the surrounding landscape had changed drastically from the last time he saw it.

The surrounding hills had collapsed, and the ground was cracked. Here and there, great shards of obsidian lay buried in the black dust, many of them shattered and by some terrible force. It was a scene of great devastation, making him feel like an essence storm had recently passed through this area.

But when he looked closely, he felt like that wasn't the case. Instead… it seemed as if a furious battle had taken place here not too long ago.

There was no sign of the mysterious archer, if they had even survived the devastation.

Staring at the vast expanse of upturned earth, Sunny lowered his shield a little.

He was quite stumped.

'What the hell happened here?'

Chapter-2099: Realm of Death

Sunny wanted to be safe and assess the situation slowly, but at the same time, the motes of light drifting into the darkness from time to time reminded him that his soul was gradually falling apart. So, he cursed quietly and descended from the tall mound of obsidian dust to explore the area.

Luckily, there was still nobody around. No one tried to pierce his heart with an arrow, either… instead, Sunny was surrounded only by silence.

After investigating the devastated swath of the dark land, he grew more convinced that a battle had happened here. The forces involved were truly fearsome, reshaping the entire landscape, but there were no bodies left laying on the ground, no sign of blood, and no traces that could tell him what exactly had transpired.

Except for one.

Kneeling in the black dust, Sunny picked up something from the ground.

A raven's feather… just like the fletching of the dark arrows he brought with him from the Shadow Realm the last time.

After sifting through the dust for a few more minutes, he discovered a few more pieces of the arrow — the shaft was broken, and the obsidian arrowhead had shattered, seemingly failing to pierce the target.

He studied the remains of the arrow with a somber expression. Another mote of light drifted into the black sky, its silver shine reflecting in the jagged obsidian for a short moment.

'Huh.'

It seemed that the mysterious archer had met something even more terrible. Sunny was not sure whether he was supposed to be happy or disturbed by the fact… not being ambushed the moment he appeared was certainly a nice surprise, but knowing that there were even deadlier beings nearby made him wary.

On the other hand…

That meant he had more things to kill, and these things were somewhere close.

'No time to waste.'

Standing up, Sunny studied the ground.

The traces might not have told him how the battle had transpired, exactly, but they did tell him one thing — the direction in which the unknown adversaries left.

So, Sunny followed in the same direction, running noiselessly through the darkness.

The newfound power filled his body, and his speed was even greater than what he was usually capable of — which had already been quite astonishing, considering his Rank and Class.

Traversing great distances each minute, Sunny swiftly moved across the desolate landscape of the Shadow Realm. The scenery around him did not change that much, or at all. The same dark hills surrounded him from all sides, and there was no sign of any life or movement. The black sky hung above him, illuminated by the distant storms.

The devastation he had witnessed near the entrance to the Gate of Shadow persisted along his path. It was more subtle in some places and much more intense in others. Many hills of obsidian dust had been destroyed, and the ground itself cracked open, the shadows flowing into the cracks to populate them comfortably.

The longer Sunny observed the signs left behind by the unknown combatants, the more disturbed he became. The power they exhibited was truly terrifying, making him feel more and more apprehension about having to face them in battle.

At some point, Sunny suddenly froze, sensing the shadows ahead of him move. He hesitated for a bit, then used some of the surrounding darkness to reform his crumbling shield and stealthily moved forward.

Traveling a few kilometers, he approached the source of movement and came to an abrupt halt.

His expression changed subtly.

Out there in front of him, scattered across the desolate land, countless black figures were moving slowly. Their shapes were vague and unclear, but unmistakably human.

They were shadows.

The shadows were walking in a single direction — the same direction he had been heading — with slow, unsteady steps. They belonged to living beings… or had belonged to living beings, at least. However, there was no spark of life about them, no hint of intelligence, no… intent. They seemed strangely peaceful, but also empty, like lost and muted echoes of what they had been once.

If anything, what they resembled most were the silent shadows that populated Sunny's soul sea.

These shadows, however, were emanating a soft shine. As they walked, trails of light particles were drifting behind them, rising into the sky. It was as if the black figures were wreathed in silver flames, dissolving slowly into the radiance.

As Sunny watched, several shadows dissolved completely, turning into pure essence. The sparks of essence were then scattered by the wind, leaving only emptiness behind…

A moment later, a few more shadows followed.

Some disappeared swiftly, and some disappeared a little slower. But in both cases, It seemed that their time here was brief, and they were not destined to reach whatever destination they were seeking.

Sunny studied the wandering shadows for a few more moments, then

let out a sigh and looked away.

It wasn't hard to recognize them for what they were.

They were the shadows of the Awakened soldiers who had perished in the recent battle, and were being reduced to streams of pure essence by the Shadow Realm.

'It's the realm of the dead.'

Just like Odysseus had once descended into the underworld and met the shadows of the dead, so did Sunny now descend into the realm of death.

It was just that these shadows were not interested in living blood, and would not regain their memories after drinking it. If anything, they seemed perfectly at peace in their slow annihilation, not paying it any attention.

Sunny closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again and continued on his journey. He passed between the wandering shadows, feeling eerily like one of them, and soon left them behind.

Eventually, he noticed a strange anomaly just over the horizon.

Out there, far ahead, a pale light seemed to illuminate the sky.

Sunny leaped into the air, soaring dozens of meters high and landing on the crest of a hill. There, he remained motionless for a while, studying the distant light, then frowned and raced toward it.

As he rushed stealthily across the sea of obsidian dust, the pale radiance seemed to move, as well. Luckily, his speed was greater, so it slowly drew nearer.

Soon enough, he managed to discern the source of the beautiful light — it was a great plume of shimmering soul essence rising into the black sky. However, the torrent of essence was much smaller than the storm clouds moving in the distance, and did not possess any of their chilling fury, either.

Increasing his speed, Sunny rushed forward like lightning and soon

crested another tall hill.

He finally saw the source of the pillar of essence...

And flinched, taken aback.

'...I'll be damned.'

There, in the distance, a colossal shadow was walking across the desolate expanse, towering above it at several kilometers in height.

It was the shadow of Condemnation.

Chapter-2100: Wolves of Shadow Realm

The shadow of Condemnation looked different from before, but it was unmistakably the same being.

The titanic figure moved across the desolate expanse of obsidian dunes with deceptively slow movements, each of its steps making the world quake. It was woven out of shadows, black dust, immense fragments of obsidian, and wind. Unlike the shadows of the Awakened soldiers, which were vague and unclear, this one was almost perfectly intact.

Myriads of essence spark were drifting into the black sky from its surface, trailing behind the shadow of the Cursed Tyrant like a billowing plume. The sight of it — the dark desolate land, the gargantuan black figure walking across it, the radiant torrents of silver light swirling around it like flame — were awesome and eerily beautiful, but also terrifying.

For a moment, Sunny wondered why he had been able to stumble upon both the shadows of the fallen soldiers of Godgrave and the shadow of Condemnation. The Shadow Realm was vast, after all, so what were the chances?

There were a couple possible answers.

One was that the Gate of Shadow sent him to a location that correlated to Godgrave, and therefore, everything that died near him there naturally entered the same corner of the Realm of Death.

Another answer was that the Gate of Shadow was simply located near the entrance to the Shadow Realm, and the shadows of all beings entered this dark land somewhere near. If so, then Sunny was currently on the outskirts of the Shadow Realm, and the direction in

which the wandering shadows were walking was, perhaps, its heart.

In any case, the shadow of Condemnation was different from those tranquil, empty shadows he had seen before.

Not only was it dissolving into essence at a much, much slower rate — so slow, in fact, that it would probably take it countless years to disappear completely — but it was also not as empty as they were.

Death was a weapon that destroyed Corruption, so the shadow of Condemnation was not really a Nightmare Creature. However, it seemed to have retained much more of its former master than the shadows of Awakened warriors. Sunny could sense a distant, subdued hint of the same harrowing will that he had felt in the Hollows emanating from the titanic shadow.

It seemed like the will of a deity transcended even death, having been inherited by its shadow at least partially.

The shadow of Condemnation seemed to possess some agency.

However…

Sunny suddenly paled and took a step back.

That was not going to save it.

'W—what the hell is this…'

After witnessing the colossal shadow, Sunny guessed that the devastation he had witnessed was the result of the battle between the shadow of Condemnation and the mysterious archer. After all, that archer had attacked Sunny on sight… why would the shadow of a Cursed Tyrant be different?

But the truth was more complicated.

Because there were more participants in this battle than he had anticipated.

The battle was still raging on. As the shadow of Condemnation walked across the dark desolate expanse, it was beset by eerie beings

that made Sunny's blood run cold.

These beings were quite immense themselves, each hundred meters across. They were formless and shapeless, woven entirely out of darkness, and moved across the black dunes as if carried by a ghostly wind.

Catching up with the titanic shadow, they soared into the air like giant shrouds of impenetrable darkness, then fell onto its body while changing shape. Countless black tendrils shot forward to burrow into the titanic shadow, and the dark drifters attached themselves to its surface like leeches, biting out enormous pieces of Condemnation's flesh. They were devouring it alive.

Or at least trying to.

The shadow of the Cursed Tyrant was not idle. Continuing to walk in the same direction, it moved its hands slowly, trying to intercept and destroy the appalling beings. A few of them had already been destroyed, but a few more were continuing to cruelly rip into the titanic shadow, consuming it piece by piece.

Like predators stalking prey.

Sunny shuddered.

A few things became apparent to him at the same time.

The first was that the Shadow Realm was not as empty as he had thought. The shadow of Condemnation, which had belonged to a Cursed being, seemed to have retained some of its will. So, there could be other conscious beings in this desolate land.

And just like Sunny, they probably needed to consume fragments to prevent themselves from crumbling.

He was not sure of a lot of things, but he was certain that Cursed beings did not die often. Therefore, the appearance of the shadow of Condemnation must have been like an irresistible lure to all the horrors dwelling in this corner of the Shadow Realm, calling them to one location to enjoy the rare feast.

But what were they?

Shadows of ancient beings, just like Condemnation? Actual shadow creatures like Nightmare or Serpent? Nightmare Creatures?

Or something else entirely?

He did not know… yet.

But he was going to have to find out.

For one simple reason…

If these harrowing things were trying to devour the shadow of Condemnation, it meant that Sunny could consume it, too. He had no chance whatsoever of defeating a Cursed Tyrant… but the shadow of one?

That was in the realm of possibility, at least, especially considering that the dark drifters had already weakened it, and would continue to do so.

Sunny studied the colossal shadow, feeling an almost overwhelming greed.

The shadow of a Cursed Tyrant… if he destroyed it, or at least landed the last hit on it, then how many shadow fragments would he receive?

It would not be just a few dozen, how it would have happened with an ordinary being. Because Sunny received his fair share of fragments when killing things similar to himself, just like humans received a portion of all the accumulated soul fragments when killing other humans.

So… thousands, probably.

His eyes glistened in the darkness.

'I must be the one to finish it off, at all costs.'

Sunny almost readied himself to rush forward when he noticed a

sudden shift in the cadence of the titanic battle far in the distance.

Another dark drifter soared into the air, ready to bite a huge chunk out of Condemnation…

When something streaked across the black sky, colliding with it and tearing the creature apart. The wounded horror fell to the ground in a torrent of darkness.

It had been hit by an arrow.

Sunny tilted his head a little.

'Well, well.'

It seemed that the mysterious archer was still in the fray.

Chapter-2101: Creatures of Darkness

The wounded being collapsed to the ground, covering it like a tattered veil of darkness. A moment later, the darkness rippled, and then something rose slowly from within it. From the distance, it looked as if an abominable shape was rising from the ground, still covered by the torn veil and pulling it up with it…

But in truth, the eerie figure was not climbing out of the darkness. Instead, it was darkness itself, reforming itself into a new shape.

Soon enough, a dreadful beast was standing on the obsidian dune, hundreds of meters tall, its four mighty paws digging into the black dust with sharp claws. Its maw was like that of a wolf, and billowing tendrils of darkness fluttered in the air behind it like a tattered mantle.

The great beast gazed upon the desolation of the Shadow Realm with lightless eyes, and then raised its snout to the black sky, letting out a harrowing wail.

Even from a distance, Sunny felt a dull pain assault his soul after the wail washed over him.

'Ah…'

He shifted his gaze, trying to understand what the Rank and Class of the appalling creature were. What was its nature? Was it a shadow, as well, or something else entirely? Was it infected by the vile curse of Corruption, or not?

Sunny was not sure that anything except shadows could enter the Realm of Death… or at least endure it for a while. Perhaps creatures of immense power, like Condemnation had been, could — but those

were few and far between.

So, reasonably, the dark drifters had to be either shadows of the dead, like the shadow of Condemnation was, or beings of shadow like him.

However…

There was something about them that made Sunny feel appalled and uneasy. Could they be Nightmare Creatures? He was not sure.

Death had been created as a weapon against Corruption, and by dying, those afflicted by Corruption were cleansed of it. Therefore, the shadows of Nightmare Creatures were pure when they entered the Shadow Realm… and if beings of shadow were born from the shadows of the dead, then perhaps that was the reason why he had never seen one that succumbed to Corruption.

Perhaps that was the reason why he had never met a shadow being in the Dream Realm, as well. After all, after thousands of years of desolation, only those twisted by Corruption populated its harrowing expanse… the Nightmare Creatures.

That said, nothing was truly immune to the profane influence of the primordial void… well, except for Nephis. Even Weaver had been forced to cut off their arm when exposed to Corruption, and so, Sunny was not going to bet his life on the notion that shadow beings could not be corrupted.

Gazing into the very essence of the dark drifter…

He saw something that he had not expected to see.

He saw nothing.

There was no light shining from the radiant soul cores. There was no vile corruption spreading from appalling nodes, either.

Instead, there was only darkness.

Not the vile darkness he had seen in the souls of countless Nightmare Creatures, but the cold and impenetrable darkness that made it

impossible for him to see anything within the monstrous beast.

True darkness.

Sunny remained motionless for a few moments, stunned.

'...Creatures of darkness?'

Before, his view of the world had been quite simple. There were humans, and there were Nightmare Creatures — and that was it. But as Sunny traveled the Dream Realm and saw more, he learned that the world was not that simple.

There were other kinds of beings out there, somewhere, as well. There were Chaos Creatures — the Void Beings — who existed in the Void. There were also beings that were both divine and profane, and therefore did not fit either description, like the mysterious nephilim. There were beings of nothingness, too, whom he had encountered in the mist above the Hollow Mountains.

There were also beings of divinity other than humans — the noble creatures, as the ancient people of the Dream Realm had called them. Among those, there were beings of shadow like himself.

So, if there existed Shadow Creatures… wouldn't it be only natural that Darkness Creatures existed, as well?

Like the horror Nephis had met in her Second Nightmare.

If the dark drifters were indeed beings born of true darkness, though, Sunny had two questions… three questions, actually.

First, were they divine or profane? True darkness had been born from the blood of a slain Void Being, after all. So, these predatory horrors could be both or neither. They could even be considered born of the Void, instead of only corrupted by its influence, like Nightmare Creatures were.

Second, what were they doing in the Shadow Realm? Shadows and true darkness were natural enemies, so it was strange to see beings of darkness here — let alone see them preying on the shadow of Condemnation, trying to devour it piece by piece.

How would they even enter the Realm of Death without being dead themselves? Sunny was not sure, but his suspicion that these were the outskirts of the Shadow Realm grew.

And lastly, the third and most important question...

How was he supposed to kill them?

If the dark drifters were indeed beings of true darkness, then slaying them would not bring Sunny the windfall of shadow fragments he had been expecting. Nevertheless, he had to slay them — for no other reason than to prevent them from destroying the shadow of Condemnation, which he wanted to destroy himself.

'That... is going to be tough.'

He was not even sure how strong these creatures were, but something told him that they were dreadfully powerful — well, the only evidence he needed was witnessing how much the shadow of a Cursed Tyrant was struggling to escape their pursuit.

And then there was the mysterious archer, as well.

Even now that Sunny had observed the battle carefully, he could not see them — which was quite odd, really, considering that his gaze could pierce any shadow.

He was wary of the archer even more than he was of the dark drifters.

'Damn it.'

Seeing another mote of light drift from beneath his armor, Sunny gritted his teeth and rushed forward.

Chapter-2102: Adversary

As Sunny rushed to reach the colossal shadow of Condemnation, he almost turned into a shadow to increase his speed and hide himself from view, acting on instinct. However, he did not — doing so would allow the Shadow Realm to ravage his soul and set him far back in the race against time.

Of course, there was the other facet of Shadow Step, as well — the instant teleportation between shadows. However, Sunny was not sure that he could use it.

Only now that he was in the Shadow Realm did he start to wonder how Shadow Step actually functioned. Did Sunny travel physically between shadows, or did he turn into a shadow when falling into their embrace, then was returned to his tangible form on the other side — all in an instant?

There was one way to find out…

Sunny dissolved into the shadows, then rolled out of them a few hundred meters further, pale and leaving a trail of essence particles in his wake. There was a pained grimace on his face.

'I guess that answers the question. Maybe?'

Using Shadow Step to teleport was even more harmful than turning into an incorporeal shadow. He had lost too many shadow fragments in that short moment.

Muttering a stifled curse, Sunny jumped to his feet and continued running.

Stripped of most of his powers, he felt like a caveman.

But then again, cavemen had been great masters of violence

themselves. He would just have to use simpler tools to accomplish his goal, and be more inventive about how he used them.

As Sunny ran, the great beast of darkness lowered its wolf-like snout to the ground, and then suddenly exploded with motion. The long tendrils of darkness billowed behind it like a tattered mantle, and black dust flew into the air like mist from beneath its mighty paws.

The dark drifter looked like a hound of the Underworld who had caught the scent of its prey.

That prey, without a doubt, was the mysterious archer.

However, they were not easily caught.

As the great beast flew across the desolate expanse of black dust, a dark arrow silently shot at it from the shadows. As astonishing as its speed was, the massive being was faster — it veered off to the side, raising a cloud of dust and causing a tall dune to collapse.

However, that was a mistake.

Just there, the ground crumbled beneath it, and the monstrous being fell into an enormous pit. On its bottom, jagged pillars of obsidian were embedded into the dust, facing upward with sharp tips. The great beast plunged into the pit and was impaled by the spikes, making the world quake and letting out another chilling wail.

It was not dead by any means. But it did sustain several deep wounds, and more importantly, fell behind — for a few moments, at least.

The shadow of Condemnation marched forward, and the remaining dark drifters continued to dodge its attempts to crush them while tearing pieces of its titanic body with hungry maws.

Sunny continued to chase them… the mysterious archer was doing the same, no doubt.

The problem was that he still couldn't see the elusive hunter.

'I have to get these things off Condemnation soon, though. At this

rate, they'll swallow my prey whole.'

Just at that moment, the archer finally revealed themselves.

A new arrow suddenly streaked across the darkness — this one was different from the previous ones, shining brightly as it soared into the black sky. Breaching several kilometers in an instant, it left a trail of turbulence in the great plume of essence emanated by the shadow of Condemnation, and embedded itself in its shoulder.

Unlike the black arrows, this one seemed to be carved from bone, its fletching fashioned out of beautiful, pristine white feathers.

A moment later, a radiant silver string revealed itself in the trail left behind by the bone arrow, manifesting itself from pure essence.

With one pull of the string, the mysterious archer sent themselves soaring into the sky.

Sunny saw a vague silhouette flying across the darkness. It landed on the shoulder of the dark colossus and straightened slowly, finally revealed against the swirling torrent of radiant silver essence.

The graceful figure of the nebulous archer was human in shape, but vague and unclear, obscured by wisps of dark smoke that fluttered behind it like a ragged cloak. It was a shadow, without a doubt… but quite a special one, emanating a sense of far clearer will, far sharper intent, and far more solid personality than even the shadow of Condemnation did.

If Sunny had to describe the shadow archer with one word, it would be… slayer.

Their figure was full of cold resolve, savage killing intent, and threatening grace.

The archer spent a short moment standing on the shoulder of Condemnation, then swiftly bent down to retrieve the radiant arrow and disappeared from view.

In the next moment, there was a sharp whistle of the air being cut, and one of the dark drifters attached to the body of the colossal

shadow suddenly shuddered and fell down in a torrent of darkness, flailing its severed tendrils as it fell.

Sunny gritted his teeth.

'So much damn competition!'

It would be bad if the dark drifters consumed the shadow of Condemnation. It would be even worse if the archer killed it, since as a shadow themselves, they would absorb all its power in an instant!

But what was he supposed to do?

Stripped of his powers as he was, Sunny was not confident of prevailing in a battle against the harrowing Darkness Creatures. He was even more wary of the archer, who seemed like a ruthless slayer forged by the desolate cruelty of the Shadow Realm into a deadly fiend.

That horror must have spent a long time here — thousands of years, perhaps — slowly dissolving into pure essence while hunting down other shadows to prolong its existence. The mere fact that it still existed was a testament to how lethal the archer was.

'If the archer can do it, then I can too.'

Sunny's eyes glistened with dark resolve.

His adversary must have been just as constricted by the nature of the Shadow Realm as he was. However, the archer was… scrappy, and resourceful. They scavenged the Shadow Realm for materials, crafted deadly implements from what was at hand, and prepared cunning traps to lure their prey into.

So, Sunny could do that, too.

Just as he thought that, his shadow sense detected something strange in the distance, just beyond the horizon.

Looking up, Sunny lingered for a moment and smiled.

A perilous idea entered his mind.

Chapter-2103: The Ride of the Shadows

Sunny was up against enemies whose power was well beyond his own. He was not sure what their Rank and Class were — if they could even be defined by these concepts — but both the Dark Ones and the nebulous slayer seemed far more threatening than most foes he had encountered before.

Perhaps Sunny would have been willing to attack them openly if his own powers weren't restricted, but with the Shadow Realm limiting what he could do, he was wary and apprehensive about engaging his competitors in a direct confrontation.

But that was alright.

There were many indirect ways to achieve his goal, as well. Sunny simply had to take a page from the mysterious archer's book and use all the resources available to him as tools — tools, after all, were a force multiplier that allowed one to channel their power to a much greater effect than would have been possible otherwise.

It was like Morgan of Valor had told him once, a long time ago, before the Battle of the Black Skull. At its core, war was simple. All there was to it was power, and application of power — the former was important, but the latter was paramount.

The mysterious archer, for example, would not have been nearly as deadly without the arrows they had crafted from scavenged materials, which allowed them to apply all their dire power to a point as tiny as the arrowhead's tip.

The problem was that there were not a lot of things around that Sunny could use. The Shadow Realm was a desolate land, after all. There was nothing here but an endless expanse of black hills...

Or rather, there had not been.

As the shadow of Condemnation marched forward like a walking mountain, too immense to even be seen in its entirety from where Sunny chased after it, his senses detected something far ahead. An anomaly that was different from the monotone desolation of the dark, barren land, and therefore promised possibility.

Sensing the strange, monumental shape ahead, Sunny recognized its nature and took a deep breath.

He had long discarded his shield. The manifested shadows were not eroded by the Shadow Realm as fast as the shadows of living beings were, but sustaining their shape was still a losing game. They crumbled slowly, eventually dissolving into darkness and becoming one with the land of death.

It was not entirely impossible to use Shadow Manifestation here, but Sunny had to change his approach. Instead of manifesting shadows once, he had to constantly rebuild the crumbling construct, using more of the surrounding darkness — and therefore more of his essence — to fuel it.

Luckily, an unceasing torrent of spirit essence was flowing into his soul here, so he had plenty to spare.

Running up the slope of a hill with astonishing speed, he closed his eyes for a moment and remembered the radiant figure of Nephis as she descended from the sky, beautiful wings shining behind her like a halo of white light.

He also remembered the demonic visage of Revel, and the furious battle they had fought at Vanishing Lake.

He remembered using Shadow Dance to peer into the essence of their being.

Then, cresting the steep dune, Sunny opened his eyes and leapt into the air. As he soared above the desolate expanse of black dust, the shadows moved around him, embracing him like a dark mantle.

And then, the mantle of shadows manifested into a pair of tenebrous

wings, the raven-black feathers glistening in the silver light of swirling essence.

As they swung, a powerful gale rose above the desolate expanse, and he was propelled into the air with great speed.

'I think… it's working.'

Human bodies were not exactly meant to fly with the help of wings. After all, humans weren't birds — their entire anatomy, down to the composition of their bones, was different. People like Nephis and Revel had been bestowed their wings by the mystical power of their Aspects, and could therefore brave the skies with natural grace...

But Sunny was different.

He was quite adept at manifesting and controlling additional limbs with the help of his Aspect — that was how he was able to weave intricate patterns of essence strings with six hands. He also knew how to create Shells of flying creatures and was deeply familiar with the shape of a crow, so the anatomy of winged beings was not new to him.

However, it was always easier and far more effective to build Shells in the faithful image of actual creatures, not create strange chimeras by mixing and matching parts of different ones, like what he was doing now due to being unable to follow his preference and assume the form of a swift crow.

Nevertheless, the experiment was successful. Sunny had managed to teach himself how to fly with the help of a pair of mighty wings by combining his experience of controlling manifested limbs, familiarity with the shape of a crow, and intimate knowledge of how Nephis flew when assuming partial Transformation.

As his black wings pushed ferociously against the wind, Sunny flew forward with astonishing speed. He had no problem maintaining balance and direction due to having spent plenty of time in the shape of a crow, as well — swiftly overtaking the colossal shadow of Condemnation and the figures battling for the right to consume it, he rushed ahead.

As he did, the dark drifter whom the mysterious archer had severed from the body of Condemnation fell to the ground like a great tattered veil. Its vast form rippled, ready to slither back into the fight. Even though its tendrils had been severed, the creature did not seem severely wounded, already aiming to rejoin its feasting siblings.

However, in the next moment, the gargantuan foot of the shadow of Condemnation fell on it, making the world tremble and splitting the earth. The creature of darkness was instantly obliterated, dissolving into a pool of elemental darkness.

Sunny left the titanic shadow behind.

Flying forward, he shot above the silent expanse of obsidian dust like a ghost, his winged figure utterly indistinguishable from the darkness of the black sky.

Soon, he saw a massive shape in the distance.

It stood out against the desolate expanse of dark hills due to its ivory color, stretching for a dozen kilometers or more.

At first glance, the shape was quite repulsive, resembling a gargantuan millipede — a long and twisting white body was elevated above the black dust, unmoving, with countless limbs protruding along its great length in symmetrical pairs.

However, it was not a millipede. Instead…

It was the bones of a great serpent. The twisting white body was its spine, and the countless pairs of limbs were its ribs. Somewhere far ahead, its immense skull rested on the black dust, partially buried in it.

That was what Sunny was aiming for.

Folding his wings, he smiled darkly and dove to the ground.

Chapter-2104: Killing Tools

Sunny landed on the obsidian dust in front of the gargantuan Serpent's skull, which towered above him like an ivory mountain. The lower jaw of the immense creature was buried in the dust, but its upper jaw loomed above him like a dark portal, its arch adorned by a palisade of great, terrifying fangs.

Sunny let his wings crumble and dissolve, then allowed himself a few moments of contemplation as he studied the ancient remains.

He had a good idea of whom these bones belonged to…

They were the bones of a Soul Serpent. Not the Soul Serpent, but one of its kin.

It made sense that Sunny was not unique in having received the companionship of a Shadow Guide. In fact, Soul Serpent was too perfectly matched to someone who had received the blessing of the God of Shadows — so, Sunny suspected that all those marked by Shadow God were bestowed a Soul Serpent of their own.

Just like those marked by the Lord of Shadows received a small shadow snake.

However…

If these remains indeed belonged to one of Soul Serpent's predecessors, then it had been a far more terrifying creature than Sunny's own loyal Shadow.

His Soul Serpent had grown to truly immense size, coiling around the entire great hall of the Nameless Temple when it slept. Its maw was large enough to swallow armored APCs whole, and its scales were like precious onyx, each the size of a tower shield.

However, Serpent was easily dwarfed by the ancient skeleton, seeming like a tiny worm at best in comparison. The remains in front of Sunny were truly gargantuan, twisting as they stretched for no less than a dozen kilometers…

Sunny was a Transcendent Terror, and since Serpent's power depended on his own… he cowered to imagine to whom this enormous creature had been a companion to, thousands of years ago.

Was it the progenitor of all Soul Serpents, or simply an especially distinguished member of their kind?

More importantly, had it been able to exist in the Shadow Realm without being consumed by it, or had it come here to die after its master perished? Depending on the answer, Sunny could try to find a way to summon his own Soul Serpent here without sacrificing it to certain annihilation.

In any case, that was not the issue at the moment.

The issue at the moment was that the shadow of Condemnation was still marching despite having become a battlefield for the nebulous slayer and the harrowing dark drifters, and all of them would reach the skeleton of the ancient serpent soon.

Sunny did not have a lot of time.

'Let's do this.'

What he needed right now were deadly tools to slay his enemies, not esoteric knowledge about the secrets of the past.

Taking a deep breath, he called upon the surrounding darkness and commanded it to embrace him as a Shell. The process was both familiar and strange — it had been a long time since Sunny ventured to construct a Shadow Shell in such a crude way, remaining in its depths as a corporeal being instead of turning into an intangible shadow and becoming its natural part.

He was a little rusty.

Nevertheless, the Shell swiftly built itself, embracing his body and

assuming the shape of the Shadow Colossus. Sunny had to shift his way of controlling it, though, adjusting for the fact that the manifested shadows continued to crumble. They longed to dissolve and return into the essence of the Shadow Realm, and so, he had to pull and manifest new shadows to replace them constantly.

From the side, that process looked quite spectacular — it was as if the Shadow Colossus was wreathed in a billowing mantle of ghostly dark smoke that trailed behind him and obfuscated his figure.

For a moment, Sunny felt dire strength permeate his being.

Then, he smiled darkly deep within the Shell and moved, delivering a devastating blow to one of the ivory fangs that barred the entrance into the ancient serpent's maw.

His strength was terrible enough that the great fang was dislodged, falling to the ground and raising a cloud of black dust into the air.

The arm of the Shadow Colossus crumbled from the dreadful blow, and he pulled his hand back, reforming it in the process.

A few moments later, Sunny delivered another terrible blow, and then a third one, dislodging one more fang.

Using his newfound strength to raise them from the ground and put them on his shoulders, he looked up, lingered for a heartbeat, and then leapt into the air.

Landing on top of the ancient skull, Sunny pushed his towering Shell forward and jumped again, landing on the gargantuan serpent's spine.

From there, he could already see the shadow of Condemnation lumbering in the distance. The beautiful trail of essence was drifting behind it like a radiant river, and a furious battle was raging on its immense body.

He could not see the figure of the mysterious archer anymore, but could guess their location based on the movements of the dark drifters. There were only three of them left in the fight, while the fourth one — the Wolf — was rushing across the desolate expanse of obsidian dust to catch up with its siblings.

One of the dark drifters was sticking to the abdomen of Condemnation, tearing into it with countless appalling maws. Sunny decided to call it the Leech. One more was drifting in the air like a great veil. Suddenly, the veil shrunk and twisted on itself, enormous wings sprouting from its depths — using them, the creature dodged back and avoided the grasp of the Cursed Tyrant.

Sunny decided to call that one the Vulture.

Another one was like a mass of seething darkness, climbing the torso with countless tendrils that shot out of its body, pulled it up, and then were absorbed back — that one was obviously going after the archer, which was evident by the arrows falling upon it from Condemnation's left shoulder.

Sunny had no idea what to call that abominable thing, so he simply designated it as the Thing.

Spending a moment to study the dire situation, Sunny put the fangs of the ancient serpent down and concentrated, manifesting more shadows.

The mysterious archer seemed to be doing fine against the dark drifters with the bow and arrow. But the appalling creatures still continued to devour pieces of Condemnation, undeterred by the ruthless enemy.

'Let me show you how it's done, then...'

Manifesting a great span of tangible shadows into a semblance of a chain, Sunny altered its composition to impart a measure of elasticity to it, and then controlled the ends of the chain to wrap themselves around the bases of the ancient serpent's rib.

Then, nocking one of the fangs on the chain, he gathered all his titanic strength and slowly, arduously took a few dozen steps back, straining the elasticity of his improvised string.

That way, he had turned the gargantuan remains into his slingshot, and the fang of the ancient serpent into a dreadful projectile.

'...Taste that!'

Grinding his teeth from the strain, Sunny finally released the chain and allowed it to snap back with terrible momentum, sending the great fang barreling through the air like a missile shot by an enormous, dreadful siege engine.

There was a roaring thunderclap, and in the next moment…

The ivory comet tore through the black sky of the Shadow Realm, striking the Vulture from the back, breaking its wings, and impaling the appalling creature on the body of Condemnation.

Chapter-2105: No Good Deed

The Vulture was like a pitch-black rag that was violently pinned to the nebulous surface of the shadow of Condemnation — of course, if that rag was large enough to cover an entire stadium with its dark expanse, rippling eerily in a ghostly wind. The impact tore its wings and slammed the creature into the colossal shadow, the ivory fang piercing and impaling it like a giant javelin.

Sunny was not sure if he had managed to deal a grievous wound to the dark creature, but he knew that it was hurt.

More importantly, it was immobilized, even if it was only for a few fleeting moments.

Already, the Vulture was moving, its voluminous body rippling to produce countless tendrils of darkness. The tendrils extended forward, found purchase on the flesh of Condemnation, and then strained, trying to pull the creature off the ivory fang.

Sunny was not paying too much attention to its movements, though…

That was because he was already loading the second fang into his slingshot.

There was a reason why he had chosen to use the fangs of the ancient serpent as projectiles instead of simply manifesting several great javelins, each the size of a siege ram, from the endless expanse of shadows around him. Even though the fangs weren't ideally shaped, as far as missiles went, he knew that they would be far more deadly.

For two reasons.

First of all, manifested shadows were less reliable here in the Shadow Realm than they usually were.

They were firm and solid for as long as he actively rebuilt and sustained them, but only just barely. He could summon a pair of tenebrous wings or form a Shadow Shell, yet there was a limit to their usefulness — the arm of the Shadow Colossus, for example, had crumbled after one blow when he was dislodging the fangs of the colossal serpent. That level of solidity was not exactly suitable for battle.

Secondly, Sunny was borrowing deadliness from the fangs themselves. He did not know how terrible the ancient serpent had been when it was alive, exactly, but it had definitely been a being of immense power. Even though it had perished countless years ago, its remains still carried an echo of that unfathomable power.

There was a reason why the arrows crafted by the mysterious archer were so deadly, and while being imbued with killing will played a large role, the materials from which they had been fashioned were also of great importance.

Glossy obsidian, dark wood, and black feathers — all collected here, in the Realm of Death, and thus bearing its mark.

What could be more deadly than the bones of an ancient Soul Serpent, then? Since Sunny needed help eliminating the predatory spawns of true darkness, he could as well call upon the remains of a being who had personified the very essence of death.

His gamble appeared to have paid off, considering how hurt by the ivory fang the Vulture seemed.

It struggled to free itself, arduously dragging its rippling body along the fang's length…

But before it could, the second one slammed into it, smashing the creature back down and piercing it through.

Sunny allowed himself to grin fiercely in the depths of his Shell. The shadow of Condemnation had drawn much closer by then, so hitting the Vulture for the second time had not been an easy task.

'Get away from my prey, you bastard!'

He could probably use his slingshot one more time...

With the Vulture wounded and temporarily immobilized, the mysterious archer would be free to deal with the Thing without distractions, too. Sunny would not call their forced alliance a partnership, but they had to deal with the dark drifters before lunging at each other's throats. Otherwise, the shadow of Condemnation was going to be consumed by the Dark Ones before either of them could kill it.

The enemy of his enemy was…

Before Sunny could finish the thought, something streaked across the black expanse of the sky, and an arrow pierced the chest of his Shadow Shell.

'...Huh?'

In the next moment, a terrifying impact tore the Shadow Colossus apart. A geyser of darkness burst from its back as its torso exploded violently. Bits of the Onyx Mantle shot in all directions like shrapnel, and while the lower half of the Shell was tossed down, the upper half flew high into the air, both mangled beyond recognition and bleeding shadows.

The deformed remnants of the Shadow Colossus crumbled and dissolved into nothingness, while Sunny slid across the spine of the ancient serpent, crashing into the base of its skull.

"Ah…"

He shook his head in a daze, and then threw a hateful gaze at the shoulder of Condemnation.

'That wretch!'

It seemed that the mysterious archer was not on board with the idea of a temporary alliance, no matter how necessary it seemed. They would rather just kill anything, and everything, that stood in their way.

Or just happened to be nearby.

No, but what kind of maniac instantly attacked someone who fought their enemies?!

Sunny rolled with a hiss and rose to his feet. By then, the shadow of Condemnation had already reached the remains of the colossal serpent. The gargantuan being stepped over it, passing above Sunny, and continued on its way.

It was as if a dark mountain stepped over him, covering him in its cold darkness for a few moments.

The Vulture was still impaled and struggling to free itself, the Leech was still tearing into the abdomen of the shadow of Condemnation with hundreds of maws. The Thing had reached the shoulder of the gargantuan shadow and was now too high for Sunny to see, while the Wolf was only a dozen seconds away from catching up with the Cursed Tyrant.

Sunny gritted his teeth, seething with anger.

'...Alright, I'll just kill you all, bastards!'

Summoning a pair of black wings, Sunny raised a hurricane as he launched himself into the air.

He was flying up, aiming to reach the shoulders of Condemnation.

Chapter-2106: Shadow of the Colossus

It did not take Sunny a lot of time to soar into the sky and reach the shoulder of the shadow of Condemnation — the opposite shoulder from where he had seen the mysterious archer last, that was, since the promise of getting another arrow driven into his heart did not seem alluring.

But even that short amount of time was enough to let him truly fathom just how immense the shadow of the Cursed Tyrant was. Before, he had only seen Condemnation from a distance — which had been awesome enough. But now that he had ascended its great height, from the mountain-like legs to the wide plateaus of its shoulders, Sunny saw the colossal shadow in an entirely different light.

Walking across the dark expanse of the Shadow Realm, it was really like a world of its own. The black hills were barely visible from the great height, and the desolate land looked flat. There were no clouds to obscure the ground, but the great plume of silver essence bathed everything in pale radiance, making it seem like a different world from the lightless, lifeless desert below.

There were hills and valleys of their own on the immense body of the shadow of Condemnation, with a strange and alien terrain that only seemed more dreamlike because the entire immensity of it all was constantly moving. The great body of the Cursed Tyrant could have sheltered an entire city, with countless humans spending their entire lives without ever setting foot on the ground.

Which only put into perspective how astonishing the feat of the King of Swords, who had slain this ancient deity, was. It was no different from a tiny ant slaying a towering elephant.

…Of course, the shadow of Condemnation was different from how the Cursed Tyrant had been when it was alive. In fact, Sunny was starting to understand that this great body was nothing more than the vessel of the actual Cursed One, who had been more of an insidious force than a physical presence.

A force that absorbed what was around it, tearing parts from the world to make them parts of itself.

Similarly, the shadow of Condemnation had absorbed what had been around it, as well. However, the Shadow Realm was different from the Hollows and Godgrave, and therefore, its body ended up quite different from its past self.

There was no soil, no stone ruins, and no jungle here. Instead, there was just dust, shadows, and silence.

So, the shadow of Condemnation was far less substantial than the actual Cursed One had been. Its towering body was woven mostly out of immaterial things — shadows, dust, and distant light, with giant slabs of black obsidian floating in the dark abyss of its vast expanse like islands of solidity.

Sunny had landed on one of these islands, released the effect of the Feather of Truth to return to his normal weight, and folded his wings, judging that it was too early to dismiss them. Wisps of ghostly smoke shrouded his figure, and a few black feathers drifted to the ground, dissolving in streams of darkness a few moments later.

He glanced at the feathers and froze for a moment, suddenly remembering something that he would have preferred to forget… the terrible visage of Nether, the Demon of Destiny, which he had glimpsed reflected on the surface of the Great River once, a long time ago.

The figure of the Prince of the Underworld had been vague and unclear, shrouded in fog. But Sunny remembered one detail of his appearance vividly — two terrible black wings that seemed to devour the sky, drowning the world in howling mist.

Sunny lingered for a moment, then shifted his gaze to the mangled

breastplate of the Onyx Mantle.

A sudden, embarrassing thought suddenly entered his mind.

Here he was, a divine shadow, in the realm of Shadow God… and yet, he was wearing a suit of onyx armor forged by the Prince of Darkness, and sporting a pair of black wings.

The Underworld was where true darkness dwelled and had originated from, and true darkness was the natural enemy of shadows. Beings born from it were also here, acting like insatiable predators. So...

Had the mysterious archer mistaken him for a Darkness Creature, as well?

If so, it was not that surprising that Sunny received an arrow in the heart instead of a greeting.

But then again, that maniac seemed like the murderous sort regardless of circumstances. The shadow of Condemnation had nothing to do with true darkness, and yet, the mysterious archer was here, fighting for the right to slay it — not at all different from the dark drifters or Sunny, intending to kill and consume Condemnation.

That was the only way to survive here, in the Shadow Realm.

Maybe Sunny would have been greeted by an arrow even if he had been wearing a beautiful silk robe sewn by Shadow God's own hands.

In any case, the mysterious archer had come dangerously close to costing Sunny an incarnation, and if there was one thing Sunny was good at, it was holding grudges. He was going to find and kill the wretch no matter the cost.

The mysterious archer was a shadow creature as well, after all… the shadow of Condemnation was not the only thing Sunny could consume to gain a treasure trove of shadow fragments.

Who knew, maybe he would be able to not only form a Titan Core, but also saturate the seven cores to finality by the end of this expedition.

But he would have to kill the four Dark Ones, the damned archer, and the shadow of Condemnation first to achieve that.

'Step by step…'

The archer was currently tied up dealing with the Thing, while the Leech was in a feeding frenzy. The Wolf had momentarily fallen behind.

So, the best chance to even the odds Sunny had was to finish the wounded Vulture. It was still impaled by the fangs of the great serpent, having yet to free itself. The fangs themselves were of value, as well, since Sunny could use them as weapons again.

'Let's hunt a Dark One.'

He briefly considered summoning Saint. She was busy helping the Lord of Shadow clear the jungle… as well as keep an eye on old Jest, who had shown a tendency to wander into places he was not supposed to go as of late.

More than that, while Saint was supposed to be immune to soul attacks, she would not necessarily be immune to the Shadow Realm… to shadow attacks? To whatever law ruled this desolate land, eroding shadows and turning them into pure essence.

Sunny was not going to risk summoning his Shadows until he found proof that they would not be destroyed as a result of entering the Realm of Death.

The bones of a Soul Serpent offered some assurance, but they could be an anomaly. For now, he had to proceed alone.

Smiling darkly, Sunny took a running start and jumped, leaping to the next slab of obsidian. There were many of them scattered around, drifting chaotically in the sea of shadows that the body of Condemnation was composed of.

For now, he had to reach the edge of the colossal being's shoulder and look down to evaluate the situation.

Then, he had to kill.

Chapter-2107: Two Horrors

Leaping from one drifting obsidian island to another and using his wings to glide across the wider gaps between them, Sunny swiftly reached a vantage point from where he could see the torso of the shadow of Condemnation.

Far below, the Leech had burrowed into the side of the colossus, having already consumed a vast swath of its nebulous body. The seething mass of darkness was twisting and rippling, hundreds of appalling maws biting hungrily into the shadow of the Cursed Tyrant.

It seemed that the Dark One did not care what exactly it was devouring — pieces of obsidian, shimmering light, or deep shadows. Although it seemed as if the Leech was feasting on the body of Condemnation, what it was truly devouring was Condemnation's essence — the very invisible, insidious force that held the great colossus together.

A bit higher, just under the chest of the Cursed One's shadow, the Vulture had already extricated its body from one of the two enormous fangs, and was close to liberating itself from the second.

The creature was separated from Sunny by a vertical drop of almost an entire kilometer, but due to its massive size, that distance did not seem significant at all… if anything, it felt negligible.

Sunny hesitated for a moment.

'...How am I even supposed to kill that thing?'

As the last resort, he could attack the Vulture with his bare hands — gods knew that the spiked gauntlets of the Onyx Mantle were lethal weapons in and of themselves.

However, ripping the vast body of the appalling creature to shreds

with bare hands seemed like a lot of work.

And the Vulture was not going to simply allow Sunny to attack it freely, either.

His thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a thunderous thunderclap that slammed into Sunny like a physical wall, making him stagger and struggle to keep his balance. The thunderclap came from somewhere to his left — there, hidden from view by the massive neck of Condemnation, the mysterious archer was currently battling the Thing.

Looking that way, Sunny saw pieces of shattered obsidian soaring high into the black sky before plunging down to rain upon the ground like a destructive hail.

Cursing inwardly, he took a step forward and plummeted down, as well.

Using both the dire might of his tenebrous wings and the [Feather of Truth] to accelerate his descent, Sunny pierced the radiance of the river of essence and fell upon the Vulture like a black comet.

Force equaled mass multiplied by acceleration, and he possessed plenty of both. More than that, he was a Transcendent being, and therefore his existence pushed against the mystical laws of the world, not just the laws of physics.

Perhaps using himself as a projectile was not the wisest of plans, but that way, the force unleashed by his impact against the Dark One was going to be truly devastating — as well as bring him close enough to tear at the appalling creature with his onyx claws.

Sunny had tensed his body in anticipation of a bone-breaking collision, relying on Bone Weave to keep him whole.

However, to his surprise, the actual impact was far less violent than he had anticipated and hoped for.

The vast body of the Vulture gave in and enveloped Sunny like a cold, porous cloth, surrounding him from all sides and suffocating him. Suddenly, he was embraced and blinded by darkness, bound by

its chilling expanse, struggling to wrestle his body free.

At first, the cold darkness was simply there, enveloping him like a dreadful cocoon. But then, it rippled and gave birth to countless tendrils that slithered across the surface of the Onyx Mantle, searching hungrily for a way in.

Sunny shuddered.

Usually, he would have only had to protect the visor of his helmet… but since the damned archer had mangled the breastplate of his armor, breaching it, the tendrils discovered an opening soon.

'Crap!'

Gritting his teeth, he feverishly searched for a solution.

The image of Dark Dancer Revel flashed in his mind.

A split second later, the Onyx Mantle shifted, covering the frame of his wings with a layer of fearsome stonelike armor. Straining with all his might, Sunny unfolded them…

And tore free of the suffocating darkness, shredding it with the bladed edges of his wings.

Pushing himself away, Sunny shot through the swirling storm of essence particles and landed heavily on the surface of the ancient serpent's fang, a hundred or so meters away. The fang was still embedded in the body of Condemnation, protruding from it like a long and narrow ivory ledge.

Rising slowly from his knees, Sunny looked up and pierced the Vulture with a cold, murderous gaze.

…The Dark One gazed upon him, too.

Thousands of lightless eyes opened on the surface of the rippling darkness, considering him with a chilling, silent, alien intent.

Then, a spark of hunger ignited in them, making Sunny feel a sickening sense of primal fear.

The Vulture shifted on the body of Condemnation, perching on its vertical slope like a giant moth.

Then, forgetting about its colossal prey for a short moment, it surged forward to consume Sunny instead.

The appalling creature was like a flood of darkness, its vast mass boiling as it exploded with countless monstrous tendrils — these ones dozens of meters long and ending in gruesome maws. It fell upon Sunny like an avalanche, threatening to bury him under its dark and dreadful expanse.

Watching the flood of darkness descending upon him, Sunny scoffed coldly.

The shadows around him stirred, embracing him like a great mantle.

In the next moment, the vast expanse of flowing shadows was suddenly infused with Transcendent essence, turning into a tangible mass. Sunny did not bother shaping this enormous Shell — the largest one he had ever created — and allowed it to remain formless and shapeless.

As the flood of hungry darkness fell upon him from above, the great mass of shadows rushed upward to meet it, countless tentacles shooting from its depths to rip apart the ghastly tendrils.

The moment the two dark masses collided, there was a deafening thunderclap, and a powerful shockwave spread in all directions, battering the ancient obsidian and making the ivory fangs crack.

The shadow of Condemnation shuddered, halting for a moment as it took another step.

Chapter-2108: Three's a Party

Here in the Realm of Shadows, Sunny was at home. It was a dire and perilous home, but a home nonetheless. Not only was his body and Aspect empowered by being here, but there was also a torrent of spirit essence flowing into his soul.

That was why his ability to manifest shadows had become more powerful than it had ever been, and why he was able to summon such an enormous Shell.

The vast Shell was formless, lacking a structure. But that was also a reason why he could build it, and make it span hundreds of meters — not at all inferior to the great expanse of the appalling Darkness Creature. Better yet, there was no risk of losing himself, since he was not delving into the essence of a foreign existence.

Instead, he was simply adhering to the shapelessness that was inherent to all shadows. And as a shadow himself, Sunny was no stranger to that shapelessness.

It was just a shame that his largest Shell yet was dwarfed by most of what he had encountered in the Shadow Realm, almost making him feel like he had been robbed of an accomplishment.

'Damnation...'

Of course, Sunny had no time to feel such frivolous emotions, since mere moments after forming the Shell, he clashed with the Vulture in a harrowing display of primal fury.

The rippling mass of darkness descended like a flood of hungry tendrils, and the seething mass of shadow rose to meet it midway. Their clash was both awesome and terrifying, bathed in the silver radiance of the river of essence, but seemingly devouring the light instead of being illuminated by it.

They rolled across the vertical slope of Condemnation's torso, clinging to it with dozens of tendrils and tentacles, and at the same time tearing into each other with countless more.

Hundreds of hungry maws opened on the rippling body of the Vulture, biting into the mass of seething shadows. In response, the shadows bit into the body of the dark drifter with thousands of bestial fangs, tearing it ferociously.

Torrents of darkness rained down like blood.

Even as his Shell was being ripped apart and pierced by slithering tendrils, Sunny grinned darkly in its tumultuous depths.

'Ah, this is not good…'

There was one thing he had realized in the very first moment of his clash with the Vulture… it was that the creature of darkness was an ancient evil — and much, much more powerful than him.

The gruesome damage it dealt to the formless mass of shadows was incomparably more dire than the damage the shadows were dealing to it, and just as Sunny was savaging the eerie creature with abandon, the creature was savaging him much more.

However…

Sunny was in his natural element. Every wound he dealt to the Vulture harmed the Dark One, while the Dark One was only damaging his Shell. For as long as Sunny had essence, he could freely mend and rebuild his great and formless, horrifying body.

He just had to make sure that the tendrils of darkness did not reach his actual self, and maybe… maybe, he would be able to destroy this harrowing abomination, after all.

...Or maybe he would be swallowed by one of the tendrils — hopefully dying in the process, instead of feeling the agony of his body and soul being slowly digested in the depths of the harrowing darkness first.

'No. I'll definitely kill this fiend.'

But why stop there?

Smiling crookedly, Sunny allowed a part of his Shell to be torn apart, then used the momentary lull in the onslaught of dark tendrils created by that sacrifice to launch a vicious attack of his own. The tentacles growing out of his vast Shell shifted, turning into a forest of inky-black arms, and hundreds of hands ripped into the body of the Vulture with sharp claws, each bearing seven fingers.

Holding it in place.

The only tentacles that had not transformed then changed, as well, their ends turning into scythe-like blades. Those blades then slashed at the particular group of tendrils that attached the Vulture to the body of the shadow of Condemnation, severing them all.

Sunny pushed both the Dark One and his Shell away from the obsidian surface. The two intertwined horrors — one made of pure darkness, the other from a vast expanse of shadows — plummeted down.

As they fell, a swarm of shadow chains shot from his formless Shell, wrapping themselves around the two ivory fangs that were still stuck in the shadow of Condemnation.

The Vulture tore into the mass of shadows, one of its terrifying tendrils penetrating the formless Shell deep enough to come dangerously close to Sunny's body. At the same time, the Dark One attempted to free itself from his hold.

However, Sunny poured more essence into the Shell, rebuilding it almost as fast as it was being destroyed — albeit not quite — and steering their fall by using the ivory fangs as purchase.

A few moments later, the two of them…

Crashed into the massive body of the appalling Leech, who had forgotten itself while gorging on the flesh of the shadow of Condemnation.

The more, the merrier.

Sunny's bloodlust was more than insatiable enough to accommodate a pair of primordial horrors.

Now, for the last act…

As the Leech momentarily switched the target of its hunger and Sunny's Shell became enveloped by the appalling darkness from two sides, melting between them in an onslaught of countless teeth, he abandoned all pretense of trying to attack the Dark Ones, and instead put all the dreadful power of his Shell into pushing all three of them into the black sky of the Shadow Realm.

Sunny, the Vulture, and the Leech shot away from the body of Condemnation, flying into the dark expanse of the sky.

As they flew, the formless Shell collapsed in on itself, turning into a battered sphere. The two ancient horrors were like tattered sails of darkness billowing behind it.

Of course, they never stopped shredding it with countless maws and trying to tear it apart with appalling tendrils.

As Sunny's Shell dwindled, they passed through the silver radiance of the essence plume and were enveloped by the boundless darkness once again, flying further and further away from the shadow of Condemnation…

However, they did not fly for long.

Because just a few moments later, they crashed into the palm of its colossal hand, which closed into a fist a moment later.

Crushing the sphere of shadows, and the two vast beings of darkness, in its obliterating grip.

Chapter-2109: Vicious Shadows

The titanic fist of Condemnation snapped shut, crushing the Formless Shell and killing the two Creatures of Darkness.

…Of course, by the time it did, Sunny was already someplace else.

After all, nothing prevented him from abandoning his Shell while maintaining its existence.

If it had been a more complicated construct, he would have lost the ability to control it with any measure of finesse after leaving — but that was beside the point in this instance, considering that the sphere of shadows had only needed to be durable enough to endure the violent onslaught of the Leech and the Vulture, and therefore, did not need to be controlled at all.

So, mere moments before it slammed into the palm of the shadow of Condemnation, Sunny opened a narrow breach in the wall of the sphere and held tightly to the chain of shadows that still connected it to one of the ivory fangs embedded in the body of the Cursed Tyrant.

The chain drew taut.

As a result, he was catapulted outside while the crumbling sphere of shadows — and the two appalling horrors that were tearing it apart — continued flying forward with great speed.

To their doom.

By the time the Vulture and the Leech perished in the crushing grasp of the shadow of Condemnation, torrents of elemental darkness flowing between the gargantuan fingers, Sunny was already halfway back to the nebulous body of the Cursed Tyrant.

Wind howled in his ears as he smiled wickedly.

'There. Go die, bastards. Leech, vulture… fools! You should have thought twice before making an enemy out of a cockroach...'

Then again, he would have killed them anyway, so it did not really matter whether the abominations had antagonized him or not.

…Reaching the abdomen of the shadow of Condemnation, Sunny slammed into the cold obsidian and momentarily let go of the chain to grab onto the cracks in the black stone. Folding his wings, he pressed his body against it and carefully looked up.

Just then, something flashed blindingly high above and dimmed the silver radiance of the swirling essence for a moment. Following the flash, something dark obscured the view.

Sunny held tightly to the cold obsidian as a river of elemental darkness flowed slowly from above, trickling onto his armor and temporarily blinding him. If he was to hazard a guess… that was what remained of the Thing, who must have been killed by the nebulous slayer on the shoulder of the shadow of Condemnation.

Soon enough, the darkness receded, having already flowed past him on its way to the dunes of obsidian dust far below.

All that remained was silence.

The world swayed slowly as the shadow of Condemnation walked across the desolate expanse of the Shadow Realm, illuminating it with the pale light of swirling particles of soul essence.

Sunny waited tensely, hiding in the shadows cast by the protruding ridge of glossy obsidian. He knew that his position was quite a bad one... after all, being far below a deadly archer on a vertical slope was not an ideal situation to find oneself in.

When no arrow came crashing down a few seconds later, he gritted his teeth and started to climb up, sticking to the darkest and deepest shadows. The body of the shadow of Condemnation seemed more solid here, but he still encountered wide gaps between the vast plates of obsidian — instead of spreading his wings, Sunny simply used the chain to pull himself up and reach the next piece of black stone.

He swiftly reached the ivory fang and climbed onto it, wondering what had happened to the archer.

Was that damned maniac dead, as well?

Or maybe they had already moved on to trying to slay the shadow of Condemnation?

It did not seem like Sunny was in immediate danger…

His face suddenly fell.

'I just had to think that aloud, did I?'

In the next moment, a black arrow fell from above, almost piercing his eye. This time, however, Sunny managed to dodge it just in time — the arrow moved with truly astonishing speed, arriving almost instantaneously, but it disturbed the swirling torrent of essence particles.

That disturbance caused the shadows populating the great expanse of Condemnation to shift, so Sunny had sensed the arrow a split second before it would have killed him.

He reeled back, and the obsidian arrowhead scraped against the visor of his helmet, slicing it apart, then struck the ivory fang.

The violent impact was so devastating that the ancient fang exploded, sending bone fragments flying away like a cloud of shrapnel, and Sunny was tossed into the air.

'Damn it!'

A moment later, a hurricane was raised by his wings, and he shot up through the silver radiance.

Sticking close to the body of Condemnation, Sunny veered left and right, trying to make him a more difficult target. He dove into the deep gorges on the polished obsidian and used jagged outcroppings as cover, dodging another arrow a heartbeat or two later.

But that was not all.

While Sunny was flying up, six Shadowspawn Shells burst from his figure and followed while leaping from one plate of obsidian to another — or rather, six dummy Shells that he had created to confuse the archer.

These ones only had the appearance of Shells, with none of the intricately complicated inner machinery. There was no rigid frame of bones, no tensile muscles, no elastic tendons... all of them created by manifesting shadow in unique ways, of course.

Instead, these constructs were no different from the most primitive shadow tentacles, with only their outward shape altered to look like a creature. Luckily, that seemed to have been enough to split the archer's attention — the decoys were obliterated one after another, but Sunny managed to keep himself intact until he reached the shoulder of the shadow colossus.

The opposite shoulder from where he had initially landed, and where the Thing had been destroyed by the archer.

Dismissing his wings, Sunny landed on the glossy surface of black obsidian and rolled.

Rising to his feet a moment later, he lowered his chin a little and looked at the figure standing a few dozen meters away from him.

The nebulous archer was surrounded by wisps of black smoke, as if wearing a tattered cloak of shadows. Their figure was obscured, and so was their face. However, Sunny could feel that his enemy was looking at him, as well.

Finally, the mysterious shadow calmly placed their bow on the ground, straightened, and unsheathed two long knives — one cut from black obsidian, the other from white bone.

Smiling darkly, Sunny revealed his hand, which held a long, sharp splinter of the destroyed fang of the ancient Soul Serpent.

Then, he revealed five more hands, each holding a bone blade of their own.

The archer tilted their head slightly.

Sunny grinned.

"That's right, bastard. Come and get me."

Chapter-2110: Disobedience

There was no pompous exchange of challenges, no proclamations, not even an insult thrown to rattle the enemy before the battle. There was no sign that the archer was preparing for a fight, like assuming a stance and cautiously probing Sunny's defenses.

Instead, one second the mysterious shadow was standing a few dozen meters away, and the next, they were already upon Sunny.

The obsidian knife glinted coldly as it tore the fabric of reality apart, aiming to plunge into his abdomen.

'F—fast…'

Sunny barely managed to deflect the blow by sensing, rather than being fully aware of, the coming strike. The splinter of the ivory fang met the obsidian blade and pushed it aside, sending a jolt of pain traveling through his arm.

'...Strong, as well.'

The nebulous slayer was terribly fast, and terribly strong. Perhaps in any other place, Sunny would have stood no chance against this adversary — but here in the Shadow Realm, the infinite abyss of shadows was imbuing him with dire prowess. It was not quite comparable to the augmentation of his shadows, but close to it.

So, he could at least resist.

Sunny deflected the obsidian knife to the side and blocked the bone knife by crossing two ivory blades of his own. Then, he attacked with three splinters of the ancient fang that remained.

He had six hands at the moment, after all.

But his nebulous enemy was elusive.

Using flowing footwork, they seemed to disappear like a mirage, sidestepping all three of the counterattacks and somehow managing to flank Sunny at the same time. All that his improvised daggers managed to pierce were the wisps of ghostly smoke.

'Crap…'

Sunny moved his three left arms, trying to defend his side, and instantly lost two of them. Severed cleanly, the inky-black hands fell to the ground — but that, at least, had bought him enough time to reel back and avoid being skewered himself.

He felt a cold chill run down his spine.

Sunny had hoped that the mysterious slayer would not be as deadly up close as they were at range… but these hopes were now crushed thoroughly. The damned archer knew how to handle a knife, as well — in fact, they fought with an utterly chilling level of skill and intent.

Their style was as lethal as it was straightforward. There were no embellishments, hesitation, or complicated philosophy to its deadly grace. Just pure lethality, inhuman ruthlessness, and absolute killing intent. An uncompromising aggressiveness that aimed to slaughter the enemy in the most swift and efficient fashion, discarding all else.

Making all else seem unimportant.

Which was not to say that the way the mysterious shadow fought was not insidious. In fact, they were like a personification of devious will — deception was a killing tool as well, after all.

Even using his mastery of Shadow Dance to predict the enemy's movements, Sunny was struggling to keep up. That was because the archer was simply too fast and aggressive to react to this foresight, and even if he did, the predictions Sunny made seemed to fail him half of the time.

As if the enemy knew how to deceive his very perception, including shadow sense, thus making all attempts to gain insight fruitless. After

all, trying to build anything on a foundation of falsehoods was an exercise in futility.

That was why the bone knife, which was supposed to be flying toward Sunny's throat, suddenly pierced the breastplate of the Onyx Mantle just below his ribs instead. Still failing to understand how that happened, Sunny staggered back, which was why the sharp blade only cut his skin and a bit of muscle instead of plunging into his lung.

He was still reeling from the unexpected failure to predict the sinister blow, but there was no time to think — that was because the mysterious shadow had not slowed down the onslaught of attacks even for a split second, pushing Sunny back with a rain of deadly strikes.

They came at him from all directions, the swift figure of his enemy obscured and made even harder to discern by the ghostly black smoke.

It was to the point that Sunny was not even sure which one of them possessed six hands instead of two… well, four, now.

Defending himself desperately, he took a step back, then another. His entire body rattled from the immense strain of withstanding the ferocious, devastating blows of the enemy, and the situation only seemed to grow more dire and frenetic with each heartbeat.

But that was fine, as well.

After all, Sunny was not without tricks himself.

His two severed hands were now laying on the ground behind the archer, having yet to dissolve into intangible shadows. And that was for a good reason — because just then, they suddenly moved and rose into the air, carried by two flexible shadow tentacles.

Still grasping the splinters of the ivory fang, they shot at the archer's back with the speed of supersonic missiles.

…And the bastard still dodged them, somehow.

Granted, the mysterious shadow was at least forced to halt the

chilling and seemingly unceasing assault to disengage, performed a strange mix of a spinning somersault and a cartwheel that had no right to look graceful, and yet did, rolled over their shoulder, and slid back on the glossy obsidian.

There was no rule that limited Sunny to only using his bone blades, after all. In fact, he would be a fool to do so.

Sparing the vague figure of his enemy a brief glance, Sunny called upon the shadows and unleashed a maelstrom of shadow chains, clawed hands, and bladed tentacles upon the nebulous slayer.

…Or at least, he tried to.

But he failed.

That was because for the first time in a long, long while… the shadows did not respond to his call.

Instead, they cowered and trembled, torn between the will of the Lord of Shadows and the cold threat of… whatever the mysterious archer was.

An ancient shadow that had spent thousands of years in the desolate hell of the Shadow Realm, hunting down their kin.

Sunny commanded them to move, and the slayer threatened them to stay still.

He smiled darkly.

"...Such audacity."

Instead of responding, the archer lunged forward once again.

Only this time, when Sunny commanded his remaining two shadow hands forward to block the obsidian knife… they jerked and halted, failing to respond to his will for a split second.

That split second was enough for the stone blade to leave another hole on his hide.

Chapter-2111: Mixed Signals

'Damn… ation…'

Sunny had fought all kinds of adversaries over his long and tumultuous career as a carrier of the Nightmare Spell — and more still after his sudden and inexplicable retirement from being one. Among them were powerful Nightmare Creatures, seasoned Awakened champions, and dreadful horrors he struggled to describe.

But very few of them, if any at all, had managed to put this kind of pressure on him. At least not in recent years, after he achieved Transcendence and came close to the known pinnacle of power.

The mysterious shadow was different from Nightmare Creatures, because it possessed the martial skill and deadly intelligence akin to that of a human.

But it was also different from humans, because its mind was utterly alien, elusive, and filled with nothing but murderous, merciless killing intent.

It was fierce and ferocious, but at the same time cold and calculating, focused entirely on slaying the enemy.

It would have been commendable, really, if Sunny did not find himself on the receiving end of this deadly resolve.

He evaded a vicious stab, only to receive a devastating kick and stagger back. Ignoring the sharp pain in his bruised ribs, he immediately moved, deflecting a slash that would have sliced his throat open otherwise. By then, an obsidian blade was already flying at his right eye, and as he tilted his head to avoid it, a knee slammed into his abdomen, making him let out a hiss.

The mysterious shadow was like a dancer that could use all of its

nebulous body as a weapon, making no distinction between its blades, fists, elbows, knees, or feet. Each precise blow was either potentially fatal or meant to open him to a deadly follow-up attack, flowing effortlessly into each other, and with the ghostly smoke obscuring its movements, Sunny could not allow his focus to slip even for an instant.

The rain of attacks persisted without a split second of respite, all of them chained together like a ruthless, suffocating vice. No matter how much Sunny resisted, he could not gain the initiative — he could only defend himself feverishly, barely keeping up with the lethal onslaught.

Wounds and bruises slowly littered his body. His armor was cut like paper, and his bones groaned under unbearable strain, on the verge of cracking. He was not bleeding, at least, but his two remaining shadows hands had long been sacrificed. Now, even his own hands were at risk of being maimed.

'Aaah…'

Dodging another blow, he growled and lunged forward, meaning to ram the mysterious archer with his armored shoulder. However, the enemy simply retreated like mist, then instantly counterattacked, nearly driving one of their knives into Sunny's temple.

They clashed like two dark whirlwinds, moving across the shoulder of the shadow of Condemnation as it took another titanic step. The radiant veil of swirling essence was torn apart by the fury of their battle, and they were enveloped by soothing darkness once again.

The thunderous cacophony tore apart the eternal silence that reigned the Shadow Realm, and the black sky shook from the terrifying power of their blows.

As Sunny and the nebulous slayer fought with their weapons, another, hidden battle was taking place as well.

It was the battle for the control over the ancient shadows that surrounded them.

Sunny was pressing his authority, commanding the shadows to answer his call and descend upon the archer in a manifested storm. The archer, meanwhile, was silently pressuring them into remaining still.

The mysterious slayer had even managed to exert influence on the manifested hands that Sunny used, making them if not useless, then at least unreliable — enough so that they had been destroyed one after another.

Unlike the physical battle, this one was not fought with weapons or martial skill. Instead, it was fought by something else… will, perhaps. Since both fighters had a claim to command them, the shadows would follow the one whose authority was more tyrannical and uncompromising.

By all accounts, Sunny had no business being equal to a Great… Supreme?... being in a battle of will and authority. However, he was the Lord of Shadows. This Attribute granted him a mandate to rule them, and marked him as a chosen of Shadow God. It served as the equalizer, allowing him to breach the gap separating him from the ruthless archer.

For now, neither Sunny nor his enemy had managed to overwhelm the other's will and gain command of the shadows. It was an exhausting draw… but, still. Drawing with a being of Supreme Rank in a battle of will was not a bad result.

Actually…

Finally managing to land a glancing blow and push the enemy back for a moment, Sunny drew a hoarse breath.

He wasn't even sure what this damned shadow's Rank and Class were. Unlike the dark drifters, the mysterious archer was not made from elemental darkness, so nothing stopped Sunny from trying to peer into its essence... he just had no opportunity before.

Using the momentary lull in their fierce clash — which would only last a split second, no doubt — Sunny shifted his gaze and looked inside the mysterious shadow.

What he saw startled him.

'What the…'

The mysterious archer was a shadow. Sunny was pretty sure that they were no different from Condemnation, a shadow that had entered the Realm of Death after the being casting it perished… albeit one that seemed to have retained more sense and sharper intent. Perhaps it had gradually become an actual shadow creature by refusing to be annihilated by the Shadow Realm over the ages.

In any case, he had expected to see dark embers like those that burned in the depths of his own Shadows, or at best lightless Shadow Cores like he himself possessed. Maybe even nothing except the dark expanse of a vast shadow.

But, to his surprise…

A beautiful, radiant core burned within the mysterious archer, shining like a silver sun. It was not a Shadow Core — it was an actual soul core, brimming with actual soul essence instead of shadow essence, like what Sunny had.

'What kind of situation is this?'

He was a human whose soul was nevertheless like that of a shadow, while the mysterious archer was an actual shadow who walked around with a soul core burning in their chest despite it all?

How was that possible?

But then again… anything was possible.

If a being as weird as Sunny could exist, then why couldn't the directly opposite being to him exist, as well?

Regardless…

What stunned him the most was that the mysterious archer only possessed one soul core, which meant that they were a mere Beast. Considering how obviously sentient the damned thing was, that probably meant that they were a shadow of a dead human.

More than that, their Rank was… strange. It was neither Supreme nor Transcendent, but rather something in between. As if the soul of a Supreme being had been damaged and weathered, losing much of its past luster.

Perhaps it had even been Sacred once… who knew? Sunny could only see the current state of the shadow, not what it had been in a pristine state.

In any case, the mysterious archer was not a Sovereign. Not only because their power seemed to have been eroded by the thousands of years of being digested by the Shadow Realm, but also because they did not possess a Domain. And even if they had been human once, they weren't one anymore.

So, Sunny had no idea what that thing was, really.

Just… a strange, tenacious shadow that was far more insidious and lethal than it had any right to be.

Nothing changed the fact that he had to kill it, though.

And regarding that…

Sunny had an idea on how to proceed.

Chapter-2112: Rebellious Shadow

Whether the nebulous archer possessed a soul core or not, they were still a shadow. That was how they had been able to survive in the Shadow Realm, and why they were hunting the shadows of living beings for sustenance.

That was also the reason why this cold and ruthless slayer could influence the wild shadows populating the desolate land, so much so that they were even scared to answer Sunny's call.

However…

Since the archer could interfere with Sunny in that way, didn't that mean that Sunny could do the same?

After all, the archer was a shadow.

And Sunny was the Lord of Shadows.

He held dominion over everything that was a shadow, whether they liked it or not. If Sunny so wished, he could control and manipulate shadows, manifest them into tangible forms, or even send them into the Shadow Realm and back.

Granted, his authority was not absolute. Although few shadows had attempted it yet, the vastest and most ancient of them could resist his will and refuse his commands… like the Fragment of the Shadow Realm did, for example.

More importantly, there was one exception to his ability to command the shadows. No matter how weak, Sunny could neither control nor manifest the shadows of living beings — their loyalty was to their masters, and no matter how revered the Lord of Shadows was by

them, that reverence did not trump that loyalty.

However…

The mysterious archer was not a shadow cast by a living being. They might have been once, but now, they were cast by nothing and belonged to nothing. They were alone and ownerless, without a master…

It is improper for a shadow, let alone such a murderous one, to walk around without a master.

Not the least of all because an unscrupulous Lord of Shadows might happen to pass by and try to exploit that defect.

So…

While suffering under the chillingly lethal barrage of insidious attacks and at the same time wrestling the cold will of the rebellious shadow, Sunny focused his own will into a sharp blade and added another command to his call.

That one was addressed directly to the damned archer and consisted of only one word:

"Halt."

The archer suddenly shuddered.

And because they shuddered, Sunny easily pushed aside the obsidian knife and plunged the splinter of the ivory fang into the enemy's side.

A moment later, the archer punched him in the face, shattering the damaged visor of the onyx helmet and making Sunny see stars. They struck down with the bone knife, slicing through the splinter of the ancient fang, and disengaged.

A moment later, the archer landed gracefully on the glossy stone a few dozen meters away and pressed one hand against their side, hunching a little.

Sunny was pretty sure that being pierced by a fang of an ancient Soul

Serpent was quite harmful, even for a relentless death machine like this damned maniac.

He dismissed his broken helmet and laughed.

"...Two can play this game, you know?"

Before, the archer had interfered with his limbs.

Now, Sunny was interfering with the archer.

Of course, the nebulous slayer did not halt as commanded. However, their movements appeared somewhat constrained, sapped of some speed and power.

Just enough to even the playing field in this battle.

Taking a step forward, Sunny ignited his will and battered the archer with a barrage of irresistible commands.

'Halt!'

'Move!'

'Kneel!'

'Surrender!'

'Beg!'

'...Die!'

But the mysterious shadow did resist them, hunching some more and remaining silent.

Their slender fingers, nevertheless, dug into the wound, grasping the broken splinter of the ivory fang and pulling it free.

A trickle of ghostly smoke flowed out of the wound, mixing with their billowing veil.

'Still ready to fight, then.'

Sunny grinned.

Well, it was only to be expected. He had never expected that his little trick would bring this ruthless slayer to their knees. It was just something to weigh them down and let Sunny himself deliver the fatal blow.

"What are you waiting for? Let's go, little shadow. I'm just getting warmed up."

The archer stared at him for a few moments silently… at least Sunny thought that he was being stared at. He could not see their face, after all.

Then, in an explosion of swift, purposeful motion…

The archer turned around, fluidly grabbed their discarded bow and dashed away, sliding over the edge of the obsidian island a moment later.

Falling into the depths of the shadow of Condemnation.

Sunny froze for a moment.

He blinked.

'Huh?'

Had he actually scared that damned killer so much?

'No, impossible…'

Then…

His eyes widened a little.

Did the bastard decide to go for the kill first, and deal with Sunny later? If so, he had to follow immediately!

Yet…

Somehow, Sunny did not feel like submerging into the nebulous body of the shadow of Condemnation was safe. In fact, everything inside

him screamed against it, as if what awaited him inside was a fate far worse than death.

It would be the same for the archer.

Then what was Sunny missing?

Suddenly, a cold chill ran down his spine, and a bad premonition made him shiver.

With no helmet to shield his head, he realized quite quickly what it was that he had missed.

Because his hair was fluttering wildly in the wind.

The wind… the wind had grown much stronger.

'...I'm getting a terrible sense of déjà vu.'

Had he not caught a ride on the shoulder of a giant once, only to be caught in the storm?

No… technically, it was on the neck of a giant.

Turning around, Sunny looked at the horizon.

The breathtaking, radiant maelstrom of the essence tempest was much, much closer than it had been before.

And the wind was only growing stronger.

Suddenly, a tiny spark of silver light shot past Sunny.

And then, another spark shot from his vambrace… this one having nothing to do with essence. It was just a spark produced when something struck the stonelike metal of his armor at great speed.

Something so swift and tiny that he did not even see it, let alone feel the impact.

Sunny stared at his vambrace for a moment, noticing a deep scratch left on it.

'Damn.'

Then, he turned around to run.

But it was already too late.

Chapter-2113: Condemned

The essence storm was still some distance away, but the wind was growing turbulent at an unnatural rate. It had been merely strong a few moments ago, but now, its force was already as violent as that of a hurricane.

The wind crashed furiously into the colossal figure of the shadow of Condemnation, shattering against its dark nebulous bulwark in a litany of chilling wails. The radiant trail of essence shrouding the colossal shadow was torn apart and scattered, submerging the world in impenetrable darkness once again.

For now.

A powerful gust slammed into Sunny's back, almost making him stagger. As it did, a few more sparks of light shot past him.

The particles of pure essence were being carried by the wind, moving at astonishing speed. Even more shocking was the fact that they were somehow able to affect the material plane — otherwise, there would not have been a new scratch on his vambrace.

Far below, countless such particles were striking the body of Condemnation, producing tiny sparks when colliding with cold stone. The body of the Cursed Tyrant was too vast to notice it yet, but when the swirling mass of the essence storm arrived…

Sunny shuddered.

No wonder the mysterious archer had rushed to seek shelter. Having survived in the Shadow Realm for thousands of years, they must have known how to survive the passing of a storm well. It was just that this time, they had been caught in the open, riding a colossal shadow far above ground — that was why the archer chose to dive into the depths of Condemnation despite how perilous it seemed.

'No, that's not quite right…'

The radiant storm clouds were still some distance away, so was there really a need to act so decisively?

Suddenly, Sunny felt a chilling sense of urgent danger.

Spinning around…

He just barely had time to see a swirling torrent of silver sparks rushing at him on the wind currents.

A split second later, the light had already reached Sunny and passed through him, disappearing into the darkness of the distant sky.

Sunny let out an inhuman shriek and fell, clutching desperately at his chest. The claws of the Mantle's armored gauntlet dug into his skin, leaving deep cuts on its surface.

"Aaaargh!"

He almost bit off his tongue from the harrowing pain.

The particles of soul essence had pierced his body, entering his chest and exiting from his back… however, they were so infinitely small that even being pierced by a hundred of them did not deal his body any lasting damage.

But…

The same could not be said about his soul. It was shredded and ravaged by hundreds of radiant blades, torn asunder and mangled terribly, whole swaths of it being utterly destroyed.

It was as if his soul was hit by a wave of explosive shrapnel.

At this point, most beings would have simply died, their souls crumbling due to the scope of sustained damage. However, Sunny's soul was held together by Soul Weave — it could maintain its integrity no matter how much of it was destroyed, as long as at least a small part of it remained.

So, despite writing in terrible pain, he was still alive.

'Curse it all…'

Sunny had to escape. This first torrent of pure essence was merely a harbinger of what was to come… soon, there would be more and more such swirling flashes of light being carried by the hurricane wind, and before too long, the shadow of Condemnation would plunge into the storm clouds. Then, nothing would be able to survive on its surface.

Groaning, Sunny rolled onto his stomach, then pushed his body to the edge of the obsidian island. As he crawled, a few more sparks of essence pierced his arms and legs, bringing with them more pain.

'Curse it all!'

Finally, he reached the edge and pushed himself over it without hesitating even for a moment.

'Thank the gods…'

As Sunny fell into the depths of Condemnation, a cold darkness enveloped him.

He could only vaguely see and sense the outside world. Out there, powerful gusts of wind crashed into the body of the colossal shadow, striking rains of sparks from its surface.

But here inside…

Everything was silent and at peace.

Everything was strange and alien.

Everything was…

Beholden to a single foreign force.

That force was the shadow of Condemnation, and nothing, not even laws of reality, could exist within it without being subjugated and subsumed by that force.

The islands of glossy obsidian were now part of Condemnation. The vast expanse of ancient shadows was, as well. So were the pale light of the distant essence storms, the clouds of black dust, the fragments of broken winds, and the pieces of the silent sky… time and space themselves were consumed by the shadow of the dead deity, becoming parts of it.

And naturally, now that Sunny was here… that invisible force had started to make him a part of itself, as well.

He was suddenly filled with horror.

That was because Sunny suddenly felt that his own body did not belong to him anymore.

His hands were not his. Even though they were attached to him, they were not a part of him.

His eyes belonged to someone else, gazing at the world with a cold and unfamiliar indifference.

The heart beating in his chest was a foreign object. His chest, as well, was merely an external vessel.

His wounded soul was a small part of a much greater being, and he did not feel pain anymore, since even that pain did not belong to him.

Even his mind was not his anymore, the thoughts entering it becoming alien one by one.

His body shifted strangely, bending at unnatural angles. The invisible force was pulling it apart, the flesh straining on the verge of ripping, to better fit into the great structure of the shadow of Condemnation. His bones groaned, ready to break.

'D—damn it…'

Someone else's eyes widened in horror.

Someone else's mouth opened to let out a terrified scream.

Chapter-2114: Switching Locations

Having found safety from the essence storm within the shadow of Condemnation, Sunny ended up in a different, but equally dreadful peril.

The dead deity subsumed everything around it to construct its gargantuan vessel. The great, nebulous body of Condemnation was built from things that had been torn from the fabric of the world to become parts of the colossal shadow instead.

And so, Sunny was currently being torn apart and subsumed, as well.

His body, his soul, his mind… everything was slowly being swallowed by Condemnation.

'That is… not good.'

He fell into the cold darkness, losing his sense of self as he did.

Then, his hand moved, slashing the darkness with the splinter of the ivory fang.

That bought him a few moments of respite.

Regaining some clarity of mind, Sunny pivoted in the air and crashed into a giant slab of polished obsidian that drifted in the vast expanse of the colossal shadow.

He still did not feel like himself, and there was still an invisible force pulling at his body.

But he could at least think for himself, for a moment or two.

'Right.'

Sunny tried to remain calm... as calm as he could be, considering the circumstances.

The situation was bad, but it was not hopeless.

How did he know that? Because the mysterious archer had plunged into the depths of Condemnation first. That maniac had survived thousands of years of obliteration in the Shadow Realm, so their will to live was not in question. The archer would not have jumped into this cold darkness if it meant committing suicide.

There had to be a way to survive.

Sunny just had to find it.

'...Isn't it all too simple, then?'

Someone else might have succumbed to the irresistible pull of the sinister force easily, becoming condemned to be a part of Condemnation forever. In fact, maybe that was how the cursed deity had received its eerie name, in the first place… but Sunny was different.

That was because he had crossed the Hollow Mountains once, and was well-versed in maintaining his sense of self against all odds. Even without a True Name, his will to exist was far more cohesive and powerful than that of most of his peers — of all his peers, perhaps.

It had been trained and sharpened arduously in the white mist of nothingness, and so, destroying his sense of self was not an easy task. Even with the shadow of Condemnation trying to assimilate Sunny, his natural defense mechanisms were resisting the assimilation furiously.

'What if I resisted consciously, then?'

Focusing on his sense of self, Sunny poured all of his fierce will into maintaining its independence.

'Becoming a part of some dead god? In your dreams! How ridiculous… being killed by a measly Sovereign, I could never…'

Slowly, Sunny managed to regain control of his body.

A dreadful force was still trying to pull it apart, and an insidious influence was still trying to steal his thoughts, but he could at least maintain this measure of control over himself.

His will to exist clashed against the will of the shadow of Condemnation, and pushed it back a little.

Of course, Sunny had far less willpower than the shadow of a dead deity. But he was merely a tiny speck for the shadow of Condemnation, so it did not use more than a tiny fraction of its will to consume him — even then, what little will it did use was not used consciously.

Sunny, however, was using all of his will to stay alive… to stay himself, rather. And he was doing it with all the focus and discipline of a seasoned explorer of the most dreadful corners of the Dream Realm.

So, he was able to maintain a fragile balance and keep himself from being consumed.

For now.

Which meant…

Groaning, Sunny stumbled to his left and rolled. In the next moment, an obsidian knife pierced the polished obsidian in the spot where he had been a split second before, sending a net of cracks running through the glossy stone.

If Sunny could maintain his sense of self within the shadow of Condemnation, then the damned archer would be able to, as well.

Which meant that their battle was not over.

It had merely switched locations.

Smiling darkly, Sunny pushed himself off the cold stone and lunged himself at the enemy. Battering the bone knife aside with the splinter of the ivory fang, he crashed into the nebulous slayer and pushed

them both off the slab of obsidian.

"How does your side feel, huh, bastard?!"

As they fell, Sunny slammed his fist into the wounded side of the mysterious shadow, hoping that it would hurt like hell.

At the same time, he spread his wings and directed their fall, intending to slam the damned maniac into the closest piece of obsidian with enough force to shatter the entire thing.

The archer had already driven one of his knives into the base of one of his wings, though, severing it entirely.

Sunny cursed as he lost control over the trajectory of their fall.

"You!"

A moment later, they both crashed into the slab of obsidian with terrible force.

Even as the impact threw them away from each other, the obsidian knife flashed, and the splinter of the ivory fang blocked its blade.

Sunny and the mysterious archer rolled on the polished stone, then rose slowly and faced each other once again.

He grinned.

"Hey, little shadow… you don't look too good."

The dark silhouette of the mysterious archer was more vague and unclear than ever, black smoke still flowing from the deep wound on their side. Their strength and speed had reduced quite a bit, as well, hinting that the murderous shadow was struggling to resist the will of Condemnation.

Well, then again…

Sunny did not look too hot either.

"How about you kneel before your Lord and die peacefully? I

promise, my Soul Sea is far more pleasant than this damned place. You'll even have great company…"

Instead of answering, the archer simply attacked.

Sunny had not expected anything less.

Chapter-2115: Spirited Away

As Sunny and the mysterious archer clashed once again, both burning with unquenchable, ruthless, and chillingly cold killing intent, he instantly felt the difference.

Well, of course he did.

It was hard not to feel it, considering that both of them were severely debilitated now. Their very bodies were under tremendous strain, being pulled apart by forces so vast and alien as to be unfathomable. At the same time, their souls and minds were being gradually consumed by the divine will of Condemnation... not even through its conscious effort, but simply because that was its nature.

Actually, it was not only the body, the mind, and the soul that the shadow of the cursed god was silently assimilating into itself.

There was something else, the very essence of one's existence that was being subsumed by the essence of Condemnation. Sunny had no word for it, and only knew that his will was a manifestation of that elusive essence.

Perhaps it was his spirit.

Therefore, he could only resist being consumed by the shadow of the ancient, dead god if he rallied his spirit and tempered his will against the foreign force...

But then again, at the moment, it was Sunny himself who was the foreign force within the body of Condemnation. So, if anything, he had to fight against the environment he had invaded in order to keep his self independent, if not intact.

In any case, the dire need to constantly exert all of his willpower against the eerie, marauding nature of Condemnation had naturally

made him weaker, slower, and less concentrated on the battle.

Luckily, the archer was in the same situation. The damned maniac was in a worse situation, actually, because there were two unceasing assaults they had to endure — one by the will of Condemnation, the other by Sunny's own.

After all, Sunny had no intention of abandoning his attempts to bring the archer down by using his authority as the Lord of Shadows. Before, his attention had been split because he had to wrestle with the enemy over the control of surrounding shadows — but the only shadows around him now were parts of Condemnation's nebulous body. So, there was no need to bother trying to control them.

Sunny only had to resist the will of the dead god, but the archer had to resist both the will of the dead god and of Sunny himself.

It was one hell of a predicament.

Sunny would have felt some pity for the poor fool… if he was not in a terrible agony, and if every move he made did not feel like nightmarish torture. That was not only because his body was being slowly torn apart from the inside, but also because his soul had been shredded by the essence storm.

He had experienced all kinds of pain, but the phantom pain of having received soul damage was in its own, exquisitely diabolical category. His soul had not crumbled due to Soul Weave, true, but it was still severely damaged — and, therefore, the suffering he felt was accordingly terrible.

'This damned thing…'

Grasping the slender wrist of the mysterious archer and driving the splinter of the ivory fang into their elbow, Sunny ground his teeth.

'It's all because of you! It's your fault, bastard!'

Shadows were taciturn creatures, so Sunny did not receive the pleasure of hearing his enemy scream in pain when the sharp piece of bone pierced their elbow joint. However, he was holding the archer's wrist, so he felt the shudder that ran through the shadow's body.

A vicious smile illuminated Sunny's pale face.

…He did hear himself scream, however, when the archer's obsidian knife plunged into his side a moment later.

Straining his abdominal muscles to grip the cold blade like a steel vice and prevent it from sliding deeper, he leaned forward and slammed his knee into the enemy's side, then pushed them away and followed up with a devastating kick, throwing the archer a dozen meters back.

Sunny himself fell backwards and groaned, pressing a hand against the deep gash in his side. At the same time, the archer crashed onto the polished stone, rolled over their shoulder, and then stood up.

This time, however, they swayed slightly while rising from the ground.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny climbed to his feet, as well.

Despite the terrible pain, the murderous glint in his eyes had only grown more unhinged.

The two of them were like two cripples here, within the cold darkness of the shadow of Condemnation. But that did nothing to assuage their killing intent.

If anything, it had only grown stronger.

"Oh look. You lost your bow."

The bow had been attached to the archer's back before, but it had disappeared at some point during their battle. Now, only the empty quiver remained, its straps frayed and barely keeping it in place.

Considering that the mysterious shadow did not seem capable of owning Memories, all of their equipment must have been meticulously crafted by hand from the scarce resources that could be found here in the Shadow Realm. So, once the equipment was lost, it could not be dismissed and summoned back. It would remain lost forever.

The loss of the bow was not a minuscule thing.

The archer remained motionless for a moment, then raised one of their knives and tapped it lightly against their side.

The meaning was pretty clear. If it was Sunny, he would have said something like...

Does your side hurt? Goodness! How terrible.

It won't hurt anymore when I kill you, though.

Despite the fact that the archer's demeanor remained cold and aloof, Sunny couldn't help but feel a hint of seething anger in that last gesture.

He grinned.

"What, that? It's just a scratch. I can't even see my innards, ha. No big deal."

It hurt like hell, though.

His whole body hurt like hell. His soul hurt, too.

Actually, this could very well be hell.

If being inside the shadow of a cursed, dead god did not constitute being in hell, then what did?

So, Sunny had to send the nebulous slayer into a deeper, darker hell.

Cursing quietly, he pushed himself forward and sent his bone blade flying at the archer's throat.

Chapter-2116: The Storm and the Mountain

The two of them continued to fight viciously, wreaking havoc inside the shadow of Condemnation. When the slab of obsidian they were clashing on cracked and shattered, Sunny and the mysterious slayer leaped through a cloud of black dust to the next one, and when that one was split in two, they chose the larger half to continue their battle.

Meanwhile, outside…

The hurricane winds had grown truly terrifying, and the darkness was chased away by the bright silver radiance. The shadow of Condemnation leaned its colossal body forward and plunged into the essence storm, making the vast wall of swirling light part with its immeasurable mass.

Usually, it was the storms that broke against the slopes of indomitable mountains. But this time, a dark mountain had moved to break the storm.

Neither the devastating wind nor the vast expanse of raging essence managed to slow the shadow of Condemnation down.

However, it was not as if the storm had no effect on it.

The essence particles could not penetrate the body of the dead god with the same ease they had pierced Sunny, but they did damage it a tiny bit. All across the immense surface of the colossal shadow, sparks of fire were struck when the streams of pure essence brushed against the glossy obsidian.

It was to a point that, in a few moments, the whole titanic figure of Condemnation seemed to be wreathed in flame.

And while each individual particle of essence dealt an infinitely small amount of damage to the walking mountain…

There was also an almost infinite amount of these particles.

So, the tiny scratches they dealt to the body of Condemnation slowly, but inevitably mounted.

It was like the wind or currents of water slowly weathering stone over the span of thousands of years, encapsulated in a manner of days, hours, and minutes. As the obsidian eroded, a cloud of black dust slowly formed around the shadow of the dead god, shining radiantly in the silver veil of the essence storm.

If Sunny saw the awesome scene of the colossal shadow walking through a storm of light, he would have understood why the giant slabs of obsidian he had seen in the Shadow Realm all seemed polished, with a smooth and glossy surface instead of the rough and uneven texture of natural stone.

But Sunny had no time to pay attention to what was happening outside the dark cosmos of Condemnation, because he was currently being strangled by a murderous shadow.

'A… crap… what the hell!'

Sunny was not a tall man, while the Nightmare Creatures he faced were usually on the enormous side. That was why he had plenty of experience climbing the bodies of his enemies to kill them… what he was not familiar with too well was being climbed like a tree.

And that was what the nimble slayer had done, circling him with elusive grace and then suddenly mounting Sunny from behind. Their legs were now wrapped around his waist, and while one of their arms was crushing his windpipe, the other was poised to plunge the bone knife into the side of his skull.

In that position, Sunny could not reach the vicious archer with the splinter of the ivory fang… in fact, he could not reach them at all, not even to bite them. All he could do was desperately struggle to hold one of their arms in the air, preventing the bone knife from making a

hole in his skull, while clutching at the other in futile attempts to liberate his neck.

'Argh, damn it!'

The archer was not really trying to strangle Sunny, of course — it would take way too long to suffocate a Saint. Rather, they were trying to crush Sunny's windpipe, which would lead to suffocation naturally further down the line.

Worst of all, there was a good chance it would work.

Grinding his teeth, Sunny did the only thing he could do — he dismissed the Onyx Mantle, allowing it to turn back into the Onyx Shell. There was no point in maintaining the suit of fearsome armor, anyway, considering that the damned archer showed the ability to cut it like paper.

With his skin becoming more rigid, however, Sunny could resist the stranglehold more.

Better yet, while the Onyx Mantle was crafted with sublime intricacy and refinement, fitting him like a second layer of skin, it still had some bulk to it. When that bulk disappeared, leaving behind only a black tunic, there was a little distance between Sunny and the archer for a split second.

Sunny used that second to turn his body slightly, and then fall back, slamming the nebulous slayer into the hard surface of the cold obsidian with dire force.

The obsidian cracked, and something inside the archer seemed to crack, as well.

That was not only because of the terrible force of the slam, but also because Sunny had augmented the impact with the weight of his body — and his body could weigh as much as a modest mountain, as long as he wanted to.

Well, to be honest, Sunny had no idea how much an actual mountain weighed. But he was pretty sure that his current weight could turn an armored APC into an alloy pancake.

Despite all that, the archer's hold did not weaken even for a second.

'No way!'

Growling, Sunny pushed with his feet, and sent them both flying over the edge of the obsidian slab, into the vast darkness of the shadow of Condemnation.

Outside, the silver light continued to assault the shadow colossus. Condemnation was walking through the radiant fury of the essence storm, making the world quake with each step. It leaned its body forward and raised a titanic hand, shielding its head from the wind.

The raging river of pure essence crashed into its forearm, striking a flood of sparks and tearing a few chunks of obsidian away.

The body of the shadow of Condemnation — the obsidian, the captured shadows, the frozen light, the fragments of shattered winds — was slowly being ground by the raging ocean of essence particles.

It was growing smaller bit by tiny bit.

Deep within its dark expanse, Sunny and the vicious shadow he was trying to kill landed violently on another enormous chunk of polished black obsidian. This one was much larger than the rest and perfectly spherical in shape, located in the space where a human heart would have been.

Since space was twisted and broken inside the shadow of the dead god, just like time was, there was no real up and down here. Sunny rolled across the glossy black surface, but never fell further down — because no matter where on the enormous sphere he stood, down was always below him.

Standing up with a stifled groan, he briefly looked around.

The alien expanse of the shadow of Condemnation was no different from before.

It was just that…

A confused frown appeared on Sunny's face for a short moment.

'Does it not… feel more cramped in here now, somehow?'

Chapter-2117: Supreme Strength

At this point, Sunny was in rough shape. He was not going to bleed out, for obvious reasons, but pain was not the only consequence of being repeatedly cut and stabbed by the eerily sharp knives of his merciless enemy.

His skin had a powerful property that allowed it to heal itself, but the same could not be said about the muscles and tendons beneath. Most of the wounds were shallow, but the accumulated damage was subtly diminishing his mobility.

And that was without even mentioning the terrible state of his shredded soul, as well as the spiritual exhaustion of having to push against the will of a dead deity.

Sunny felt like crap.

That last blow had been especially debilitating, for some reason — having crashed into the surface of the enormous obsidian sphere, Sunny had the wind knocked out of him entirely. He remained motionless for a split second too long, laying on the cold stone, then staggered to his feet and looked around briefly.

Somehow, the alien expanse of Condemnation, with its vast darkness, frozen glimmers of silver light, nebulous clouds of black dust, and jagged slabs of obsidian drifting in the cold emptiness… felt smaller than it had before, like a galaxy that was slowly collapsing under the pull of a supermassive black hole at its center.

But he had no time to ponder the cosmic beauty of dead deities.

Lowering his gaze, Sunny glared at the mysterious archer.

His enemy had already risen from the ground. The murderous shadow did not seem to be faring well, either — it was hard to spot any wounds on their body behind the veil of ghostly black smoke, which veiled it like a tattered cloak, but the silent slayer's overall form was now much more vague and less substantial than before.

As if struggling to maintain its shape at all.

Sunny knew for a fact that the archer was hurting. There was the deep penetrating wound in their side and a dozen minor cuts here and there… one of their elbow joints was utterly destroyed, as well. The extent of damage was evident by the fact that the shadow moved their right hand awkwardly and sheathed the bone knife, leaving only the obsidian blade pointing at Sunny.

He smiled as he massaged his bruised neck.

"Why don't you use that knife to slit your own throat?"

These words seemed like mere provocation, but in fact, they were not. They were an order empowered by his authority as the Lord of Shadows, and as such, carried his will.

The archer's hand trembled, but refused to move in the end. Instead, the cold, frightening presence emanating from the ragged shadow grew even more intense, making Sunny shiver.

His smile widened.

"...Maybe not."

With that, Sunny raised his ivory blade and took a step forward.

The archer advanced with swift, murderous grace. Sunny could see the enemy, and he could sense the enemy as well — after all, he was facing a shadow. He had already gained a deep understanding of how the slayer of the Shadow Realm fought, so he could predict where the next attack would come from.

The obsidian blade was going to fly at his neck.

So, Sunny lowered his blade and protected his abdomen, instead,

saving himself from being gutted when the obsidian knife suddenly struck low.

He had already established that the damned maniac knew how to deceive his shadow sense, after all. Either his enemy had rich experience of battling those who followed Shadow God, and therefore possessed abilities similar to Sunny's, or they knew how to weave deception into their movements simply by virtue of being an old and devious shadow themselves.

So, at any given moment, the opposite of what Sunny thought was going to happen could happen.

The problem was that the archer also knew that Sunny had seen through the deception, so they would sometimes just go through with the telegraphed attacks instead.

It was nothing short of vexing, as well as the reason why Sunny had so many holes in him by now.

'You vile thing...'

Binding the obsidian knife with the splinter of the ivory fang, Sunny twisted the archer's wrist — or at least tried to — and punched with his free hand, intending to split the enemy's skull open. However, the elusive shadow was too swift and nimble, leaning a little and taking a flowing side step to avoid his fist.

Sunny tried to grapple them, but the archer slid from his grasp like a dark wind. A moment later, there was already a ceaseless onslaught of lethal attacks flying his way, and Sunny had no choice but to defend himself.

He had hoped that with his enemy losing the ability to use one hand, the cadence of the battle would change. But even left with only the obsidian knife, the vicious shadow never slowed down the suffocating, oppressive assault — it was just that, now, the archer was using their legs more, subjecting Sunny to a devastating barrage of sudden kicks.

Their combat technique remained swift, meticulous, supremely

aggressive, and absolutely murderous. And while Sunny would not be cut by a kick, the devastating concussive force of each one was wreaking havoc with his inner organs.

If this continued in the same manner, he wasn't going to win. He was going to either die, or — much more likely — be driven into such a weakened state that he would not be able to resist the will of Condemnation anymore, which was a fate worse than death.

Sunny remained calm… but he was also at his wits' end.

Ever since deciding to return to the embrace of civilization, he had often found himself in situations where his powers were severely restricted.

However, he had never once considered these instances as an impairment — if anything, they were empowering, proving how versatile his Aspect was. It was to the point that no matter what dire limitations were placed on him, Sunny was never left without a multitude of choices on how to deal with the situation.

Adaptability was king, and therefore, it was the supreme form of strength. So, what some would see as being weakened, Sunny saw as the most indisputable proof of strength.

But!

But… wasn't this situation a little bit too much?! Here within the Shadow of Condemnation, Sunny was not just stripped of some of his powers, he was basically stripped of all his powers. Even Shadow Dance, which had never betrayed him before, was proving to be useless against the damned archer.

He was reduced to using only his fists and a sharp piece of bone, like some kind of caveman… worse even than a Sleeper, barely qualified to be compared to an Aspirant. What next? Would he be forced to use his teeth like a beast?!

Sunny was seriously angry.

'To hell with this…'

Glaring at the archer, he smiled viciously and decided to be as desperate and beastly as he could be.

Chapter-2118: Like a Beast

Outside, the shadow of Condemnation continued to wade through the fury of the essence storm. The dark colossus took step after step, indomitable, unfeeling… the world quaked under its steps, and the raging ocean of silver essence had no choice but to part in front of it.

The devastating winds were powerless to stop the titanic shadow, and the inescapable annihilation of the soul storm could not destroy it.

The storm did damage it, however.

Little by little, the dark mountain of Condemnation's nebulous body was being ground down by the infinitely small, intangible particles of soul essence. The great slabs of obsidian were slowly growing smaller, the cold expanse of frozen darkness was diminishing, and everything else that had been condemned to be a part of the dead god's shadow was gradually disappearing into the silver radiance.

As it did, the inconceivably tall figure of the dark colossus was gradually shrinking.

Already, its enormous height had been reduced by a few hundred meters. The girth of its titanic torso had diminished, the circumference of its gargantuan forearms had dwindled.

The deeper into the storm Condemnation went, the faster its massive body was being ground by the raging torrents of essence.

Like a shadow was slowly melting in light.

Within the vast darkness of its body, meanwhile…

Even Sunny had noticed that the nebulous sea of darkness around him was growing smaller, and that the outer edges of the dead god's shadow were drawing nearer. He had no way of knowing what was

happening, however, since the very nature of space within Condemnation was strange and alien.

Sunny had other matters to worry about, anyway.

Namely, the damned archer.

Just as he thought that he saw a glimmer of endless silver radiance somewhere far away, the obsidian knife flashed toward his heart, and as Sunny turned his torso to avoid it, a crushing kick came barreling at his ribs from the side.

This time, however, he was ready for it.

Not because of his intricate mastery of Shadow Dance or insight into the vicious shadow's ruthless battle style, though. It was simply because, considering the circumstances, this kick was the optimal and most damaging action his enemy could perform — in short, it was because Sunny would have done the same.

So, he managed to catch the calf of the mysterious archer, feeling surprised for a moment by how slender it was despite packing such a devastating punch… well, devastating kick, really.

The momentary surprise did not slow Sunny down, however. Holding the archer's leg in place, he instantly brought the splinter of the ivory fang down with dire force, piercing the base of their thigh and ruthlessly pulling the blade toward himself to slice the enemy's leg open all the way down to the knee.

The archer shuddered.

It was a definite win for Sunny, but one that he knew would come at a cost — because by using both of his hands to deliver the terrible wound, he was leaving himself open to a fatal retaliation.

The obsidian knife flashed toward his throat, but Sunny lowered his head and caught it with his teeth.

As his lips were cut open…

He grinned and tightened his jaw, biting through the black blade and

shattering it completely.

'My teeth are no joke, you fool…'

They were altered into a deadly weapon in their own right by Bone Weave, after all.

Finally, the archer seemed taken aback a little.

But it only lasted a split second.

Then, leaving one of their legs in Sunny's grasp, the vicious shadow jumped up and delivered an absolutely crushing kick to the side of Sunny's head with the other one.

Sunny saw stars.

Falling to the ground and choking on sharp shards of obsidian, he let out a stifled laugh.

"Ouch. Ouch… that one really hurt…"

The archer landed on their wounded leg, stumbled, and fell to one knee.

A split second later, without any pause, they instantly unsheathed the discarded bone knife and lunged at Sunny, aiming to finally end his life.

Raising a hand weakly, he tried to stop the enemy from landing on him.

…Or so it seemed.

Instead, as soon as Sunny's fingers touched the mysterious archer, he smiled wider… and pulled them both into the embrace of the shadows.

Using Shadow Step was dangerous, but being killed by the damned maniac was, obviously, more dangerous.

That was why he had conceived of this plan.

Diving into the familiar darkness, Sunny found it not familiar at all. That was only to be expected, considering that the shadows he dove into were not the caring shadows he had known before. They were a part of Condemnation now, and therefore, their dark depths were a part of Condemnation, too.

The eroding nature of the Shadow Realm affected Sunny even here, though. He had known that it would — the radiant trail of essence behind the dead god was proof, and the occasional motes of light that drifted both from himself and from the mysterious archer as they fought were, as well.

Now that Sunny had abandoned his corporeal form — and forced his enemy into abandoning theirs — the Shadow Realm tore into them with a much more obliterating pace.

Their dark souls were dissolving now at a much faster rate than before… which was a cause for concern, without a doubt.

However, Sunny's soul, while damaged, was still empowered and held together by Soul Weave.

And the murderous archer had not looked too solid and unscathed even before being plunged into the embrace of shadows.

'Let's see which one of us lasts longer.'

Sunny felt a sense of vicious glee.

The archer, now a formless shadow, tried to escape from his grip and rush back to the material plane.

But Sunny just held them tighter, not allowing the enemy to flee.

'Where are you going now, bastard? Why, what happened?! Weren't you hellbent on killing me?!'

Piercing him with arrows and cutting him with sharp knives... the wicked thing had to pay.

The archer just struggled more desperately.

Sunny, of course, did not let go.

He wanted to laugh, but sadly, he had no mouth at the moment.

'Die!'

…Outside, the shadow of Condemnation had already shrunk to half its size under the assault of the annihilating torrents of silver essence.

Finally, one of its legs grew too thin to support its prodigious weight.

As the shadow colossus lowered its foot to take another step, its shin shattered and split apart.

Condemnation fell.

The entire world shuddered when its gargantuan, mountain-like body crashed heavily into the ground.

…Deep within the body of the dead god, Sunny felt something changing. He was momentarily confused.

'Huh?'

Then, the darkness quaked, and both he and the murderous archer were thrown out of it, back into the harshness of the material world.

Around them, the nebulous body of Condemnation was collapsing.

Chapter-2119: On the Other Side

Sunny once again found himself laying on the smooth, cold surface of the obsidian sphere… only, this time, it wasn't so smooth, covered by a net of deep cracks.

Time and space were convulsing all around him, making it feel as if the world itself was falling apart. High above, the shimmering clouds of black dust were boiling. The vast expanse of darkness was in a state of flux, flowing in a raging current. The frozen glimmers of distant light were being extinguished one by one.

The drifting slabs of obsidian were colliding and shattering, turning into violently expanding clouds of stone shards.

He was in no state to pay attention to the cosmic cataclysm, however, because the state of his own body and soul was just as terrible.

'Aaah…'

Sunny did not feel too well.

Worst of all… while he possessed seven bodies, he only had one soul. And due to its current pitiful state, the Lord of Shadow wasn't feeling too hot either, out there in the Hollows. His other incarnation, hidden in the camp of the Song Army, was suffering as well.

Luckily, he had somehow managed to hide his weakened state from those around him. The last avatar was currently alone in the basement of the Marvelous Mimic, at least…

But those three weren't his concern right now. It was his original body, which was in danger of being destroyed, that was in trouble.

'How did this even happen… I was supposed to be living peacefully in Bastion, making pancakes...'

Groaning, Sunny tried to stand up.

But as he did, the obsidian sphere shuddered and split apart, throwing him down again.

Down, down, down…

After a few moments of falling, the word lost its meaning, since all directions became one.

What the hell was happening?

Something was wrong with the shadow of Condemnation. An infinite expanse of blinding silver radiance was enveloping the vast darkness of its nebulous body, and somewhere out there, the endless expanse of rolling black hills was far closer than it was supposed to be, moving as it slowly fell behind.

As if the dead god was not walking anymore, but crawling instead.

The world became smaller and smaller…

Until everything turned dark.

And then, Sunny could suddenly feel his weight once again.

He was thrown violently into the cold air, the wind assaulting him with cruel force. Down became down again, and up became up. At the same time, he found himself falling once more, plummeting from a great height.

He was surrounded by shadows, too.

Sunny only paid attention to one of the changes that had happened to the world, however — it was that the insidious pull of Condemnation's will, which had been attempting to consume him all this time, was suddenly gone.

'...I am outside the shadow of Condemnation.'

No sooner than Sunny realized that, his battered body crashed violently into something hard. He bounced off the tough surface with a stifled scream, then fell again and rolled down the slope of a tall dune, throwing a cloud of dust into the air.

Slamming into something at the foot of the dune, Sunny groaned and opened his eyes, seeing the black sky of the Shadow Realm above him.

…Black sky?

There were no silver clouds of raging essence neither above nor around him, meaning that he was outside the essence storm, as well.

He was safe.

Well… safe from the storm, at least.

His whole existence, however, was nothing but agony. His body was in excruciating pain, and his soul was too. Even his mind was utterly exhausted and reeling, barely able to function.

Ignoring all that, Sunny muttered a breathless curse and slowly pushed himself off the ground, standing up with a stagger.

Then, he looked around to assess the situation.

At first, he struggled to understand what he was seeing and sensing.

The familiar landscape of the Shadow Realm — the desolate expanse of dark hills — had disappeared. Instead, massive, strangely shaped white ridges were stretching into the distance as far as the eye could see. All around him, narrow boulders were strewn about in long clusters, some small, some towering at hundreds of meters in height.

Ahead of him, the radiant white wall of the swirling essence was slowly moving away.

Looking at it, Sunny realized that he was on the other side of the soul storm. The shadow of Condemnation… must have torn through it, after all, only collapsing when the danger had passed.

Then, he shivered as he recognized the nature of the strange boulders around him.

Those weren't boulders… they were bones. They were the remains of Soul Serpents, forming a vast field. Most were much smaller than the colossal skeleton he had seen before, though.

Which was not to say that they were small.

The hard surface that had arrested his fall was the spine of a dead Soul Serpent.

He was in a vast graveyard where countless bones lay, towering above the black dust.

Looking down, Sunny even noticed a human skull laying among the shattered bones.

Then, he was distracted by a sudden noise.

Turning around, Sunny saw two things at the same time.

Hundreds of meters away, a vague shadow was struggling to coalesce into a solid shape, writhing on the ground. The damned archer seemed to have survived, as well.

And between them…

The remains of the shadow of Condemnation lay.

The dark colossus was gone, and all that was left of its great obsidian body was a tall hill of fine black dust, no different from all the others.

However, something was moving in the air above the obsidian dune.

At first, it looked like a small twister — a mere gust of wind that spun weakly, sucking up black dust and tiny stones as it moved.

But then, Sunny saw a shard of bone being absorbed into its twisting mass, rising high into the air and then freezing in place at the heart of the strange anomaly. A moment later, a larger piece of bone flew up, and not too far away, a giant skull of a dead serpent trembled,

rising a few centimeters above the ground.

The whirlwind was slowly growing larger… and stronger. Consuming more and more of what was around it.

It was then that Sunny understood what he was looking at.

The body of the shadow of Condemnation might have been gone, but the invisible force that had built it from usurped parts of the world — the dead deity itself — was not.

In fact, it was already starting to build a new vessel for itself.

The shadow of Condemnation was right in front of him, intact.

Which meant…

Sunny glanced at the splinter of the ivory fang in his hand, then at the murderous archer who was slowly rising to their feet in the distance.

Then, he pushed his battered body forward with a greedy grin.

Chapter-2120: Godslayer

The shadow of Condemnation had not been destroyed, but it was currently vulnerable. And while Sunny and the ruthless slayer of the Shadow Realm were both in quite a sorry state, they were also both positioned perfectly to deal the weakened deity a fatal blow.

Well, Sunny was alive. The mysterious shadow was dead, but... refusing to depart.

In any case, either of them could kill the shadow of Condemnation. The only question was who would strike first.

So, Sunny rushed forward without wasting any time. Or he tried to, at least… sadly, his body was damaged quite severely, so the best he could manage was limping forward with urgent haste.

'Ah, it hurts…'

That was what he would have thought in any other circumstances. But currently, there was only one thought in his mind:

'Kill it, kill it… I must kill it first!'

Smiling darkly, Sunny limped toward the whirlwind of black dust while gripping the splinter of the ivory fang tightly. Far away, the mysterious archer had finally managed to settle their form and rose from the ground, ignoring the harrowing wound on their thigh entirely.

'Crap.'

Sunny could feel the chilling gaze of the archer shift, landing on him first, and then moving on to the shadow of Condemnation.

'Crap!'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny commanded the shadows to manifest into dark wings behind him… however, just then, the will of the murderous archer slammed into the world, forcing the shadows to cower in fear.

"You damn traitors!"

Cursing loudly, Sunny broke into a sprint.

The archer was moving, as well…

But he was faster.

Sunny had come to his senses first, and so, he reached the shadow of Condemnation first.

Leaping into the air, he plunged into the whirlwind of black dust. For a moment, the familiar alien force pulled at his mind, body, and soul, trying to absorb them — but it was much weaker now, so he simply ignored it.

A moment later...

He stabbed his ivory blade into the very heart of the dark whirlwind, where a perfect sphere was slowly forming from the shard of shattered bone.

A mundane blade might not have been able to hurt the intangible force that was Condemnation.

But Sunny was using the fang of a Soul Serpent, and of an unfathomably powerful one, at that. Soul Serpents were conduits of Death, and Sunny was its heir… so, he sharpened his will into infinitely cold killing intent, and channeled that intent into the splinter of the ancient bone, willing it to deliver death and destruction to the shadow of the dead god.

It seemed to have worked.

When the ivory blade pierced the heart of Condemnation…

Sunny sensed an imperceptible ripple spread through the world.

And then, he felt something ancient and indescribably vast break apart.

And then, he felt nothing but hollow emptiness take its place.

The whirlwind was suddenly torn apart, and the black dust settled.

The shards of bone fell to the ground.

Sunny fell, too.

The splinter of the ivory fang had shattered, leaving only a small piece of bone in his fist.

But…

As he fell, his eyes widened, and a nearly inexhaustible torrent of shadow fragments — far greater than anything he had ever experienced before — flooded his soul.

It was both exhilarating and terrifying.

He could feel his shadow cores, which had been damaged somewhat by the Shadow Realm, being replenished and rebuilt to how they were before.

And it did not stop there.

The raging torrent of shadow fragments filled his soul, saturating it…

And deep within its dark depths, the seventh, final core had finally come to fruition, igniting with lightless splendor.

Falling onto the dune of black dust, Sunny rolled down its slope and let out a short, panicking laugh.

'Crap, crap, crap…'

In the next moment, the familiar agony of a new shadow core being formed sundered his mind, making Sunny scream and convulse.

This time, there was no soothing voice of the Spell to accompany him through the process. He had not woven corresponding words into the

Handy Bracelet, so the bracelet was silent, as well.

In fact, it had not even announced the slaying of the shadow of Condemnation — probably because it had no idea what to do when Sunny destroyed shadows, which were not technically alive, and therefore couldn't be killed.

'G—g… get a… get a grip, you idiot!'

Sunny struggled through the pain, trying to regain awareness of his surroundings.

Replenishing the spent fragments was a good thing. Finally forming the seventh core and becoming a Titan was simply splendid. That was why he had come to the Realm of Death, after all.

But he had really chosen a terribly unfortunate moment to accomplish this wonderful feat.

Because…

Just as Sunny tried to stand up, a merciless hand gripped his neck and roughly pulled him up.

'Crap!'

The shadow archer was still alive.

…And full of fury, it seemed, glaring at Sunny through the wisps of ghostly smoke with chilling malice.

Half-paralyzed by the dreadful pain of his soul being torn apart by the emerging shadow core, and his very being changing, Sunny shifted his weight and kicked the archer with as much strength as he could muster.

For a moment, he felt like his neck would break, but it slipped from the enemy's iron grip instead. Sunny was pushed away and fell on the black dust, rolling further down the slope of the dune.

The archer pursued.

Crashing into a towering rib of a dead Soul Serpent at the foot of the hill, Sunny groaned weakly and tried to crawl away.

"Aaargh!"

Damn! Why did it hurt so much!

The archer caught him after a few moments. Sunny rolled, avoiding the foot that would have crushed his skull otherwise, and raised his arms to defend himself. A devastating blow descended upon him, almost caving his ribcage in, and a moment later, a harrowing kick sent him flying into the air.

Sunny landed in a heap and rolled a couple of times, coming face to face with the human skull he had noticed earlier.

The skull stared at him with gaping black holes of its empty eye sockets, making Sunny shiver.

Would his own skull be left laying here, forlorn and forgotten, as well?

Rolling onto his back, he rose a little and caught the archer's foot, which had almost reached his head by then.

No… considering how vicious this bastard was, there was no chance in hell that his skull would be left intact.

Sunny had saved his head from being kicked straight off his shoulders, but in the next moment, he was punched in the face instead.

Flying back, Sunny crashed into the spine of a dead Soul Serpent and fell to his knees. His vision was blurred, and he tasted blood on his tongue.

'I'm actually bleeding… wow…'

He was practically drowning in blood.

The pain was subsiding, at least.

Raising his head to look at the blurry figure of the approaching archer, Sunny spat a mouthful of blood...

And smiled.

"Hey, fool…"

The archer did not pay his words any attention, raising their fist to deliver the final strike.

Sunny tensed his muscles, preparing himself.

"...Behind you."

The murderous shadow froze for a split second, then spun around.

But it was already too late.

Because there, behind them, another Sunny was already bringing down his fist with all the dreadful power of a Transcendent Titan.

It was the long-awaited seventh shadow.

Chapter-2121: Titan

The Seventh Shadow's titanic blow landed on the archer's spine and sent them flying like a tattered doll — or at least it would have, if not for the original body, who lunged forward at the same time to deliver a strike of his own.

The opposite momentum of his blow made the impact utterly devastating, damaging the surroundings and sending a shrapnel of bone fragments flying in all directions.

'Ah… ouch…'

His tortured body did not respond well to the violent strain of the battle, though. In fact, it felt like he was on the verge of collapse.

But that was alright.

Because there was another, entirely fresh Sunny ready to pick up the slack.

As soon as the archer landed on the ground, the seventh incarnation was already upon them. The enemy was weakened and dazed, but still dangerous. Even slowed down by the oppressive commands of the Lord of Shadows, they managed to dodge the lethal attack and roll away, standing up a moment later...

Still burning with the same cold, murderous determination.

Sunny smiled weakly as he pushed his original body from the ground.

The mysterious shadow was truly stubborn. Or maybe they simply did not know any better, having spent thousands of years slaying others in order to survive. Did it even remember anything except hunting and killing? Was it even capable of giving up?

It did not matter, anyway.

Even if the archer's resolve was infinite, they were already too far gone. Whatever strength they had left was enough to kill one Sunny, perhaps, but not two, especially with the second one bearing no physical wounds.

Surrounded by the towering remains of the dead serpents, the three of them fought without holding anything back. The ground quaked from the fury of their desperate clash, but it swiftly became apparent that the archer had no hope of emerging whole from that fight.

Sunny even felt a little dirty, for a brief moment, for ganging up on the murderous shadow.

But that bizarre and ridiculous notion quickly disappeared, replaced by vindictive glee.

'...So what?'

So what if it was two against one?

That was what the damned maniac deserved!

Sure, in other circumstances, even seven of his incarnations would not have been enough to kill the vicious slayer of the Shadow Realm, let alone two. After all, he kept calling his enemy "the archer" for a reason — the mysterious shadow was obviously a sublime master of archery and ranged combat, using traps, cunning, and meticulous ambush tactics to hunt down their prey.

Melee combat was not even their true area of competence, unlike his, yet that was exactly what Sunny had forced upon them.

Not to mention the fact that all of the archer's careful preparations had been rendered useless when the shadow of Condemnation stomped through their hunting grounds, pursued by the Creatures of Darkness.

There was no telling how many of those dreadful beings the archer had fought, defeated, and destroyed before Sunny showed up, either — so, from the very start, he had been fighting someone weakened

and drained by a long, unforgiving battle.

But what of it?

Sunny had been in a dire state from the very start, himself. His powers were severely restricted, and he could not even risk summoning his Shadows.

So, he sincerely believed…

That even if the two of them had clashed in their peak states, the end would have been the same.

The archer would have been killed, and Sunny would have been the killer.

Just like he was going to kill the damned thing now.

The archer was still fighting, but their strength was dwindling. The Seventh Shadow calmly dodged their crushing blows, delivering one cruel, inescapable strike after another in return. The original body served to distract and slow down the enemy, allowing for these strikes to land.

When the murderous shadow tried to switch targets and finish off the original body first, the seventh avatar would ruthlessly punish the moment of distraction, thus making destroying the more battered version of Sunny impossible. He had mastered the strange art of fighting as a group, after all — the two incarnations moved in perfect harmony with each other, weaving an inescapable net of death.

Sunny evaded a swift and devastating kick with flowing grace, then used his other body to lunge at the archer from behind. The shadow sidestepped his lunge easily, but that took a precious moment — a split second later, Sunny's fist struck the side of their head, sending the enemy reeling.

And using that opportunity, the original body delivered a vicious kick to the side of the archer's knee, feeling something crack with dark satisfaction.

…It was a little barbaric, to simply batter the mysterious shadow to

death. But what could he do? All his weapons were gone, and even the last splinter of the great ivory fang had shattered when he destroyed the shadow of Condemnation. Now, only a piece of it remained, still clenched in Sunny's fist to add some weight to his punches.

He inhaled hoarsely.

"Just give up and die with grace…"

As the archer regained their balance and raised their arms to block an obliterating blow, the seventh shadow added:

"Find peace within me. Or whatever…"

Their enemy looked almost like a ghost now, having lost most of their solidity. Black smoke was flowing from countless wounds on the archer's body, surrounding them like a billowing veil. The contours of the graceful body beneath it had always been nebulous, but now, they were so vague as to almost seem immaterial.

It was time to end this.

Sunny might have harbored a grudge against the mysterious archer, but an enemy like that…

They deserved a clean death, at least.

Lunging forward with both of his bodies, he sent one of them low, while the other struck high.

The archer staggered back, avoiding the strike to their head, but they failed to avoid the original body. A moment later, Sunny managed to grab them and wrestle them to the ground.

This was the end.

While the seventh avatar grabbed the archer's arms, the original body pressed the enemy into the ground with all the prodigious weight allowed to him by the [Feather of Truth] and raised his fists.

His face was calm and cold when he struck down, aiming to split the

mysterious shadow's skull.

One blow was not enough, so he struck again, and again, and again…

Until even the Onyx Shell could not keep up with the devastating power of his blows, and the skin on his knuckles split, drops of crimson blood falling into the ghostly wisps of black smoke.

The archer was still struggling, but by now, their movements were so weak that it did not matter.

Taking a deep breath, Sunny allowed for the shard of ivory fang he was still holding in his fist to slide down, and then caught it between his fingers.

He brought the sharp edge of the bone fragment to the archer's throat.

However, just as he was about to slice it open...

A friendly voice resounded from the darkness.

"My, oh my. I wouldn't do that…"

Chapter-2122: Friendly Advice

Sunny froze, suddenly feeling cold fear grasp his heart.

It was a jarring transition to experience, from the cold resolve of ending an enemy's life — and all the confidence that came with it — to utter unease and a piercing sense of alarm.

But what else was he supposed to feel when hearing a disembodied voice resound from the darkness of the Shadow Realm?

Added to that was the fact that the voice had not spoken in the familiar language of the waking world. Instead, it had spoken in a dialect of the ancient language that the later civilizations of the Dream Realm used.

Still holding the sharp shard of bone to the archer's throat, Sunny cautiously looked around. He spread his shadow sense in all directions, too, feverishly trying to find the source of the voice.

There was no one.

Feeling his mouth turn dry, Sunny lingered for a bit, and then asked in a hoarse voice:

"...Who's speaking?"

His other incarnation was similarly tense, ready to shield the original body from danger if need be.

There were a few moments of silence, and then the voice answered in a nonchalant, somewhat friendly tone:

"I am."

Sunny blinked.

'What the…'

This time, he was able to pinpoint the direction from which the voice was coming better. It was very close.

And low to the ground.

His gaze explored the graveyard of serpents, until finally falling on something he had seen before, but did not pay a lot of attention to.

A lone human skull laying amidst the serpent bones, attached to a partially destroyed human skeleton. There was no spark of life in the battered skeleton, and even when Sunny shifted his gaze, there was neither the radiance of soul essence nor the vile darkness of Corruption inside the old bones.

However, as he watched, he noticed a tiny mote of light drifting into the air from inside the gaping black hole of the skull's empty eye socket.

Just then, the skeleton spoke:

"My, oh my! When you look at me like that, boy, I get shy."

Sunny shuddered.

The jaws of the ancient skull did not move, but the voice definitely… definitely was coming from inside it.

He stared at the skeleton with wide eyes for some time, then forced himself to open his mouth.

"I... know you, don't I?"

The white skull, obviously, did not show any reaction.

"Do you? Goodness gracious! How odd. Never have I imagined being known by such esteemed personas… I am nothing but a humble slave, after all."

Sunny smiled darkly.

"Well, what would you know… so am I."

The skeleton laughed.

"No, no… the likes of me can't even be compared to the exalted beings like you. A genuine divine shadow! Who would have thought that even after Shadow God's death, his shadows would continue to roam the world… my, oh my! How despicable."

Sunny narrowed his eyes and remained silent for a while.

Then, he said somberly:

"You are Eurys of the Nine."

Now, he was convinced that the talkative skeleton was exactly who he had assumed it to be. It was the mysterious creature Nephis had taken off a mystical tree in the Nightmare Desert to use as a guide.

But how had he ended up in the Shadow Realm? According to Nephis, she had parted with Eurys in the outer reaches of the Underworld.

The white skull stared at Sunny expressionlessly for a while, then said evenly:

"Huh. So you do know me."

Sunny lingered for a moment, considering what to do next. The skeleton had not harmed Nephis… but that did not mean that he would not or did not have the ability to harm Sunny. After all, not just anyone could endure thousands of years of a strange unlife, being nailed to a tree in a literal hell.

It was unfathomable how Eurys was able to exist, to begin with.

But first things first…

Lowering his gaze, Sunny looked at the weakly struggling archer, then shifted his gaze back to the battered skeleton.

"You said that you wouldn't have killed this thing? Why?"

Eurys of the Nine chuckled.

"Oh, it's just a piece of friendly advice, from one slave to another. Think about it, boy… she has been hunting down shadows for thousands of years here, in the realm of Shadow God, instead of quietly succumbing to death. Such a defiant spirit! What do you think will happen when you kill her, and her shadow enters your Soul Sea instead?"

Sunny suddenly felt a chill run down his spine.

He… had not considered that.

There was definitely some truth to the skeleton's words. By all accounts, once a shadow traveled to the Shadow Realm, it was supposed to peacefully succumb to the divine will of its creator and be annihilated, turning into pure soul essence — like the shadows of the Awakened soldiers he had seen.

Even the shadow of Condemnation, despite having seemingly retained some of its agency, simply followed the law of the Shadow Realm and attempted the pilgrimage to its supposed center, dissolving into essence in the process.

However, the mysterious archer was different…

Not only had they… she, apparently… defied the natural way of things by roaming the Shadow Realm as she pleased, but she had also refused to be annihilated, surviving for thousands of years by slaying other shadows instead.

Sunny had long suspected that his Soul Sea was like a nascent, miniature version of the Shadow Realm. If so, the laws governing it would be much weaker, and much easier to defy, than the ruthless laws governing the Realm of Death.

So, what would happen if he killed the mysterious archer?

…Wouldn't he be just inviting a serial killer into his soul?

He shuddered.

Noticing his reaction, the battered skeleton let out a laugh.

"I see you realized the danger. She has become quite feral, hasn't she? Such a shame… my, oh my! The person was so valiant and righteous, yet the shadow is so wicked and vicious."

Sunny stared at the white skull with a frown.

"You say it as if you knew her."

Eurys remained silent for a bit, then laughed.

"Why, of course! After all, she is one of the Nine."

Chapter-2123: Courting Death

One of the Nine…

Sunny considered these words for a few moments, a deep frown twisting his bruised face. The seventh incarnation just raised an eyebrow, maintaining a nonchalant attitude.

He had encountered traces left behind by the mysterious Nine a few times throughout the years. However, he knew neither who the members of this nebulous group were nor what their purpose was. All he knew was that they seemed to have left deep scars on the history of the Dream Realm.

Auro of the Nine, the adversary of his First Nightmare.

Eurys of the Nine, the guide who had led Nephis to her Second Nightmare.

And Alethea of the Nine, the First Seeker… the source of the Defilement whose destruction had ended their Third.

And now, here was the fourth.

…A shadow of the fourth, at least.

Sunny stared at the dazed archer, then turned to study the white skull intently before speaking.

"And who, exactly, are the Nine?"

A few particles of light escaped from the empty eye sockets of the skull before it answered in a neutral tone:

"It seems you do not know me, after all."

Sunny smiled darkly.

"I know that you are avoiding the answer, though."

Eurys sighed.

"If our tale has been forgotten, then let it remain so. It's not something to be proud of, anyway... and all of us are dead now, hopefully."

He seemed reluctant to share.

Sunny considered his next words for a few moments. He wanted to know the secrets of the Nine desperately, but at the same time, he was wary of the motionless skeleton.

It would probably be best not to irritate the strange being, especially in his current state…

At least not yet.

Sunny finally spoke:

"You don't seem that dead, though. And yet here you are... how did you end up in the Shadow Realm? You're not a shadow."

Nephis had left Eurys in the Underworld, so what was the talkative skeleton doing here?

The battered skeleton laughed.

"How did I end up here, indeed? Simple, really… I walked here."

Sunny continued to stare at the white skull, not amused.

Eurys sighed.

"What? I really did. It was hard to reach the Shadow Realm before, but now that it has no master and all the realms seem to have been fused together, it's easier to travel from one to another. The Realm of Death always shared a connection to the Underworld, which served as the boundary between the lands of the living and the lands of the dead. Now, it simply lies beneath it. If you jump into the Abyss, you'll end up falling into the Shadow Realm… that was what I did."

Sunny's eyes narrowed slightly, and he couldn't help but look up.

Slowly, it dawned on him that the starless black sky above him was not a sky at all. In fact… he was deep underground. Deeper even than the Underworld, which lay beneath the Hollow Mountains.

However, the Shadow Realm was vast. So, it seemed that there was an entire subterranean world beneath the known surface of the Dream Realm, stretching all the way from the Forgotten Shore to… who knew where. He would only find out if he crossed the entirety of the Realm of Death and found a way to the surface on the other side, if it even existed.

Did other entrances to the Shadow Realm exist?

He was suddenly fascinated by the question.

If they did…

Then maybe one was hidden in the caverns under the Forgotten Shore, where the dark sea had once sought shelter from the ruthless sun. Another could be hidden in the empty abyss below the Chained Isles…

This matter was not exactly important, but as an explorer, Sunny could not help but be enchanted by the mystery.

The presence of the Creatures of Darkness could be explained by proximity to the Underworld, as well. It was very curious.

However, he had more pressing issues to address. For example, the motives of the mysterious skeleton.

Glancing at the expressionless skull, Sunny frowned.

"Why would you come here, though? The Shadow Realm is not exactly a hospitable place. In fact, its promise is one of death and annihilation."

Eurys of the Nine chuckled.

"What an apt description! But that is exactly why I wanted to come

here. You seem to have been blessed by Shadow God, boy… but I, on the contrary, was cursed by him. Me, Azarax, Kanakht, and a few others — my, oh my! What a bunch of pitiful wretches we are. We were banished from death, and so, we are unable to die."

He remained silent for a few moments, and then added:

"Shadow God is gone, though. So I've made the journey myself and came to the Realm of Death to be annihilated. Ah… but it's taking a while. So tedious."

Just as he said that, another mote of light drifted into the air from within the white bones, proving that the Shadow Realm was, indeed, slowly destroying even the… whatever it was that Eurys was.

Sunny remained silent for a while, shocked. The shadow of the archer struggled weakly below him, but he paid it no attention.

'What the hell?'

Cursed by Shadow God? Unable to die?

What kind of curse was that?! Why did Sunny get haunted by a loathsome apparition when he was cursed, but Eurys got to be immortal instead?

Where was justice in that?!

He let out a resentful sigh.

'It seems that this guy was not lying when he said that he had angered the gods…'

What was it that Nephis had said? That Eurys claimed to have slit a god's throat?

Did gods even have throats?

Sunny hesitated for a while, then asked somberly:

"You said that if I kill this shadow, it would enter my Soul Sea, just like it had entered the Shadow Realm. So, then… is Shadow Realm

what remains of Shadow God's Soul Sea?"

The skull stared at him incredulously.

"Huh."

Eurys paused for a moment, and then said in an amicable tone:

"Gods are not like us people, boy. They don't really have bodies, souls, and Soul Seas… it's all the same. So no, we are not inside the Soul Sea of Shadow God."

The white skull chuckled.

"Instead, we are simply inside Shadow God. Shadow Realm is his corpse."

Chapter-2124: Dangerous Questions

Sunny took a moment to fathom the astonishing truth that Eurys had revealed to him so matter-of-factly.

It was a hell of a thing to process.

...No, really.

'I am inside Shadow God's corpse.'

The Shadow Realm… the entirety of it… was the sacred body of a god.

Which meant that all the other Divine Realms, like Godgrave and Stormsea, were as well.

…And the waking world, too.

Gods were vast, after all. Vast enough to encompass entire worlds within them, it seemed.

But gods were also dead.

The Dream Realm, the realm of the Forgotten God, was slowly consuming all the rest. So did it mean that Forgotten God was feasting on the corpses of his siblings?

'How morbid.'

What the hell did all of it mean?

'Well… it's not like I did not suspect something like that, already.'

Actually, Sunny and Nephis had discussed a similar theory in the

past. It was during the conversation about the titanic skeleton in Godgrave, and whether it had truly belonged to a god.

Nephis was of the opinion that it was too puny to be a god… which was a funny thing to say about a corpse the size of a continent.

But now, it did not seem funny anymore.

Actually, Sunny was not even in disagreement with Nephis. If anything, he was tempted to agree. After all, he had been inside the Tomb of Ariel, which was built from the remains of an Unholy Titan. The Great River was like its Soul Sea… and if the soul of an Unholy Titan could encompass an entire realm, then what about an actual god?

Still, suspecting and knowing were two different things. Especially here, in the desolate darkness of the Shadow Realm.

Sunny struggled with the desire to gulp, his mouth terribly dry.

He lingered for a few long moments, then asked hoarsely:

"If this is Shadow God's corpse, then what killed him?"

That was the greatest secret of all. That was what Sunny truly wanted to know… what had killed the gods? What had killed the daemons? How had the Doom War ended, and how had the will of the Forgotten God escaped the Void, slowly turning all of existence into his nightmare?

Hearing his question, Eurys chuckled.

"What killed Death? My, oh my! I wish I knew. Sadly, by the time the gods perished, I was already nailed to that damned tree. The view from there was not great."

Sunny stared at him somberly.

Somehow, he doubted that the skeleton was being entirely honest.

The white skull betrayed no emotion, however.

Eventually, Eurys offered him a bone:

"I doubt it were the daemons, though. By the end of it all, they were losing the war pretty badly. Otherwise, I would not have been captured by the warriors of the Divine Host, would I?"

He laughed.

Sunny surmised two things from that statement.

First, that at least one of the Nine — Eurys — had participated in the Doom War under the banner of the Demon Army.

Second… that the daemons seemed to have lost the war, or at least had been close to losing it near the end.

That was the first true piece of information about the Doom War he had received.

Sunny smiled darkly.

"...Are you sure that you weren't the one who killed Shadow God? I've heard that you boasted once about slitting a god's throat."

Eurys exploded with laughter after hearing that.

"Oh… so you have met that abominable girl, it seems! Good, good. I'm glad that she has survived, nephilim or not."

He paused for a moment, and then chuckled.

"Yes, I did indeed tell her that I had slit a god's throat once. However, I never said that it had killed the god! What kind of god would die from such a trifle?"

Sunny winced from the amount of nonsense he had been subjected to in the last few minutes.

'What? What does he mean?'

"...I thought you said that the Shadow Realm was Shadow God's corpse? His body was quite huge, then. Pray tell, how would one slit

the throat of an entire realm?"

The skeleton, who had remained motionless all that time, finally moved.

Eurys… shook his skull, the bones scraping unpleasantly against each other.

"No, but what kind of divine shadow are you? Don't you know anything, boy?"

Sunny scowled.

"How am I supposed to know anything if the god who was supposed to cast me is dead?!"

Eurys stared at him silently for a while, then returned to his previous pose and grew still once again.

"A better question would be how can you even exist, but… fair is fair. To answer your questions — gods were indeed vast and unfathomable, but they took mortal vessels from time to time. Avatars, as some called them. Those were easier to reach."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

Mortal avatars… that he could wrap his head around. After all, he had avatars of his own, even if they were not exactly the same.

What surprised him more was that Eurys seemed to have no idea about how Sunny had come to be a Shadow Slave.

Well… it made sense, in hindsight. The talkative skeleton seemed like someone who knew so much as to almost seem omniscient, but reasonably, that knowledge only encompassed the past. If he had really spent thousands of years nailed to a tree in the Nightmare Desert, he would not know anything about what had happened after the final days of the Doom War.

To him, the Nightmare Spell was merely a fringe cult that a small group of believers was spreading secretly in the Mortal Realms. He would not know what Sunny and Nephis really were, or how they

had come to be that way.

Sunny tilted his head a little, suddenly coming up with another question.

It was hard to collect his thoughts because there were too many things he wanted to ask, but that one was, perhaps, the most vital.

"...You are the first being from the ancient times I've met who is not entirely insane and consumed by Corruption. How come?"

Eurys stared at him with the black gaping holes of his empty eye sockets.

"Haven't you met that abominable girl, as well?"

Sunny scoffed.

"That's different! She's from the waking world, just like I am."

The skeleton let out a chuckle.

"The waking world? What's that?"

Sunny suppressed a sigh.

'He's clueless.'

After lingering for a few moments, Sunny tried to explain:

"The waking world… is the last of the Divine Realms. There are people still living there, free of Corruption. The rest of them, as well as all the Mortal Realms, have already been swallowed up by the Dream Realm, and are only populated by Nightmare Creatures — that's what we call the Corrupted Ones. However, our world is being consumed by the Dream Realm too, piece by piece."

Eurys sighed.

"Oh… then you and your people must be fighting against the Corruption with all your might, united against a common foe. What brilliant camaraderie! No wonder a divine shadow and an

abominable nephilim can exchange words so freely."

Sunny coughed in embarrassment.

"Actually… currently, my people are at war. With each other. Have I mentioned that the last Divine Realm is the Realm of War God?"

Eurys remained silent for a long while, and then suddenly exploded with laughter.

This time, he laughed longer than usual, and his laughter seemed different from before.

It was tinged with mysterious darkness.

After a while, the white skull turned a little to stare at Sunny.

"War God? My, oh my! Such irony."

He paused for a moment, and then added:

"You asked who the Nine were? Well… to tell you the truth, child of War…"

His tone turned a little cold.

"Regardless of who we were, we hated War God and her children the most."

Chapter-2125: Paving the Road to Grace

Sunny could not help but tense up after hearing a hint of coldness in the skeleton's usually carefree and friendly tone.

At that moment, he realized the precariousness of his position with painful clarity.

Here he was, in the darkness of the Shadow Realm, beaten and battered… talking to one of the Nine while holding the shadow of another down. Sure, the archer was barely conscious and seemingly in no state to continue the battle, but on the other hand, the only safe enemy was a dead one.

He had no idea what kind of powers Eurys of the Nine possessed, but they had to be quite mystical for the wandering skeleton to traverse the Underworld and reach the Shadow Realm more or less in one piece.

It was alarming, to learn that the mysterious Nine had some kind of grudge against the Goddess of Life and her followers.

Sunny chose his next words carefully.

"Oh, really? That is surprising. How come Auro of the Nine was an imperial soldier, then? Wasn't the Empire ruled by the cult of War?"

To be honest, he wasn't quite clear on what the Empire was and who ruled it. However, in his First Nightmare, it had seemed as if both its soldiers and citizens worshiped War God — to the point that they went around burning down temples of Shadow.

He had learned bits and pieces of ancient history later on, too, some pointing to the fact that the militant Empire had gone on an

unstoppable conquest spree during the dusk of the Golden Age, just before the final war.

So, it was a bit surprising to learn that Hero — Auro of the Nine — had secretly harbored a deep hatred of War God.

Hearing his words, Eurys just chuckled, seemingly full of mirth.

"Auro, an imperial soldier? So what? I was an imperial slave, myself! Why, is there a better way to destroy an empire than from the inside?"

Sunny coughed.

He, of all people, could not argue with that.

After all, that was exactly what they were doing — Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie. They were working to undermine the kingdom of an heir of War by fighting under his banner.

"Well… alright. Fair. I'll give you that."

'So the Nine were determined to destroy the Empire…'

And Auro had been only posing as a loyal imperial soldier. No wonder he had seemed so different from the rest of the slavers...

It was a tantalizing piece of information.

Still. In Sunny's First Nightmare, Auro had been merely an Awakened swordsman, and one who did not seem to have unsealed his Aspect yet, at that. So, the Nine must not have been that powerful back then. How had nine people hoped to destroy an empire that enjoyed the favor of a god?

He wanted to know more.

"So, it was just the nine of you against the entire Empire?"

Eurys scoffed.

"Questions, questions, questions… you are so full of questions, boy.

Why are you so interested in the ancient past, anyway?"

Sunny smiled darkly, reminding himself to be polite and ingratiate himself with the mysterious skeleton.

"Oh. Two reasons, mainly…"

'Be nice, be polite. You need to get into his good graces!'

His mouth moved on its own:

"Because we are still paying for the sins committed by you vile bastards in that ancient past! If you impossible, abhorrent fools did not go and break the damn world back then, I wouldn't have been so desperate to learn how to fix it, would I?!"

Eurys just stared at him silently with empty eye sockets.

He did not seem too offended, but...

Sunny took a deep breath and held it, struggling to suppress his scathing fury.

The seventh incarnation, meanwhile, spoke in a more neutral tone:

"Well, and also — you might not know it, but the Nightmare Spell has been running rampant for thousands of years. These days, it is more or less the only god that exists. The Dream Realm, meanwhile, is blooming with what we call Nightmare Seeds, and if you enter one, the Spell gives you a special trial. That trial takes the form of an event from the ancient past, so knowing more about the past makes it easier to survive there."

He paused, then added:

"Obviously, the Nightmares are quite deadly. So one would naturally have no reason to enter one, except for the fact that if a blooming Seed is left intact, it will continue to infect the world with Corruption. Something like that, at least."

For the first time, Eurys seemed a little surprised.

"Weaver's little spell? So it has gotten that powerful? Huh… how surprising. No wonder that abominable girl reeked of daemon, then."

Sunny's eye twitched.

'...Little spell?'

He took another deep breath and forced his original body to speak:

"So, what? Are you going to persecute me needlessly just because of where I come from? Let me tell you something, Eurys…"

He looked at the skeleton somberly.

"...being petty is unbecoming of a gentleman! Spitefulness is a hideous thing, a blemish on one's character, and an obstacle on the path to virtue. An enlightened man must know how to let go of grudges and embrace forgiveness! Tolerance and compassion pave the road to grace!"

Of course, Sunny was no gentleman, had no interest whatsoever in being virtuous, considered enlightened values to be synonymous with foolishness, and preferred to stay as far away from grace as possible, lest he catch it.

But the ancient skeleton did not need to know that.

Eurys remained silent for a while, then sighed.

"My, oh my… how eloquent! Don't you worry, boy. I wasn't going to act on my distaste for your kind — it's all in the ancient past, anyway. Let bygones be bygones. I was just contemplating how deeply ironic it is, that after thousands of years, the only ones who remain are the children of War. You can't even imagine."

Sunny grinned.

"Well… I'll be able to imagine if you explain things properly."

The skeleton stared at him silently for a while.

Then, Eurys chuckled.

"Ah, but you expressed how desperate your need for knowledge is. So why should I share mine for free?"

Chapter-2126: Spirit of Reciprocity

Hearing those words, Sunny was taken aback.

What… what was this familiar feeling?

'Ah! I know!'

Of course...

It was the feeling of being swindled!

Frowning, he studied the expressionless skull for a few moments. The skeleton did not move, and if Sunny did not know any better, he would have assumed that it was a completely mundane corpse. The only thing that betrayed Eurys's unusual nature was a rare mote of light that drifted off the white bones from time to time.

…The same particles of essence rose from both of Sunny's incarnations, as well, reminding him that he was still on the clock.

'That bastard.'

So Sunny had to bargain with a shameless corpse in the middle of the Realm of Death, and worst of all, the corpse held all the chips.

He grimaced.

"You're the one who spoke to me first, were you not? So, if anything, it seems like your need is greater than mine."

Eurys chuckled.

"That was not because I wanted to speak, just out of the goodness of my heart. Well, I don't really have a heart, but you get the meaning

— I simply wanted to save a naive boy from making a terrible mistake. Because I am kind and generous."

Sunny stared at him dubiously.

"Oh, yeah? Are you sure that you did not want to save this shadow here, instead? After all, you had kept quiet up until the moment I was about to kill one of you Nine. What a coincidence."

The white skull scoffed.

"One of us Nine? My, oh my! You must be confused, boy. She is not one of the Nine — she is merely a shadow of one of the Nine. A feral and mindless shadow, at that… an insult to the memory of my dear comrade, really, whose very existence offends and saddens me greatly. Ah, alas! If only you were strong enough to endure the consequences of destroying her…"

Sunny scowled.

"It sounds like you are a man of great integrity indeed, Eurys. And didn't you just mention your kindness and generosity? How admirable, how commendable. No wonder you helped Nephis… the nephilim… so selflessly. Someone as selfless, kind, and generous as you would not take advantage of a naive boy and try to swindle him, would you? "

Eurys let out a chortle.

"That abominable girl? Why yes, I helped her… but that was merely in the spirit of reciprocity. She took me off that damned tree, after all, so I was obligated to return the favor. However, what have you done for me? Nothing… surely, there has to be a favor made for me to reciprocate in kind."

Sunny stared at him for a few moments, then sighed in dejection.

It wasn't often that he found himself on the losing end of a verbal battle. He was usually the most brazen person in the room, and meeting an even greater scoundrel was a rare occurrence.

'How shameless!'

Sunny looked at Eurys with resentment, lingered for a while, then said somberly:

"So what do you want?"

The mysterious skeleton remained silent.

Eventually, he spoke:

"Why, it's simple. You are a Shadow Slave, are you not? Someone who wields the power of Death. So, I want you to kill me."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'Huh…'

The seventh incarnation tilted its head a little.

His eyes narrowed.

"Wait, wouldn't that just defeat the purpose? Dead men tell no tales. Who will answer my questions if I kill you?"

Eurys let out a short laugh.

"Well, I'll answer your questions before you kill me, of course. Look at me now — I am resting here in the Shadow Realm, patiently waiting to be destroyed. It is taking forever… however, if you can hasten the process, I'll sure spare you some time."

Sunny considered his words.

Eurys… was definitely lying about a lot of things, or at least not telling him everything. The mysterious skeleton already had the means to break the will of Shadow God and be destroyed — he could have surrendered to the mists of the Underworld, for example, and simply become nothing. He could also wait and slowly be annihilated by the Shadow Realm.

But perhaps death and destruction were not the same. And perhaps Eurys was seeking a true death, which only Sunny could give him.

Eventually, Sunny nodded.

"Alright, I'll kill you. So start talking."

The skeleton let out another laugh, this one sounding a little wistful.

"I wish it were so simple, boy. Sadly, you are not nearly strong enough, yet, to kill me. So, come back after you become Supreme… better yet, Sacred. I'm not going anywhere, so you'll be able to find me right here."

Finally, Sunny's expression cracked.

"Become Supreme?! Do you think I have not tried?! How the hell am I supposed to become Supreme, you useless pile of bones?!"

Eurys stared at him with what looked like amusement… which was quite a feat, considering that the white skull had no means to emote anything.

Eventually, he said:

"What is the big problem? I watched you slay that eerie Sacred shadow before. From what I've seen, you are already most of the way there — you have the Will, and you even know how to wield it. That is the hardest part. More than that, your nascent Domain is already fully formed, and its weight is crushing. Do I even need to mention how profound your connection to your source element is? Boy… I've never seen anyone as ready to become Supreme as you. The only thing you need is to take the last step."

Sunny blinked, suddenly robbed of breath.

What Eurys said… in hindsight, it rang true.

He had indeed taken great strides on the path to Supremacy as of late. Hearing that he, too, possessed a nascent Domain was a bit surprising… but other than that, the mysterious skeleton was correct.

Sunny had reached the precipice of Supremacy without even realizing it.

The first and most important step… had probably been the very act of deciding to return to the embrace of civilization and take responsibility for the future, imposing his will upon the world.

After all, that was what a Sovereign was — someone who bent the world to their will, thus claiming authority over it.

Then, it was a series of smaller steps. Claiming a Citadel, establishing his rule over a vast swath of Godgrave. Slaying and subjugating Great Nightmare Creatures, forging his Transcendent Battle Art. Joining the Sword Army and observing the King of Swords to learn from his example… especially during Anvil's battle with Condemnation.

Observing Rain and learning from her natural Awakening, as well.

The most important step, surprisingly… had been connected to improving his mastery of weaving. It was forging the Blessing that had truly opened his eyes and broadened his horizons, teaching him how to wield his will.

There were other important lessons and accomplishments, too. Numerous lessons, really.

Nephis had her own way of reaching toward Supremacy, while Sunny had his.

He was almost ready.

All that he was missing was, indeed, one final step. A catalyst that would ignite all his previous attainments, fusing them into a throne.

But Sunny had no idea what that catalyst was.

He hesitated for a while before asking cautiously:

"And what is that last step?"

Eurys remained silent... then answered gingerly:

"How should I know?"

Sunny let out a growl.

'...That bastard!'

Chapter-2127: Act of Defiance

Seeing how twisted Sunny's face had become — one of his faces, at least, since the seventh incarnation did not deem it worthy to react in any way — Eurys let out a laugh.

Those chuckles of his were seriously starting to get on Sunny's nerves...

The jovial voice resounded from the depths of the white skull a moment later:

"Don't be too disheartened, boy. Everyone has to follow their own path to Supremacy, and the nature of the last step is different for each Supreme. However… there is some commonality between them. A shared principle that is revealed if one observes carefully. I can't tell you what exactly it is that you must do to become Supreme, but I can share my observations with you."

He paused for a moment.

"After all, it is in my best interest to see you usurp the throne of shadows. You might actually manage to kill me then."

Sunny let out a frustrated sigh.

How wonderful would it have been if someone just handed him all the answers? But he was not that lucky, of course.

Still, the mysterious skeleton's offer was better than nothing.

Sunny gathered his thoughts, then asked somberly:

"So? What have you observed?"

Eurys remained silent for a while.

"Well. Supremes have always been rare, even in my time. Supreme humans, at least — enough so that every time a new one appeared, the balance of power in the Mortal Realms was bound to change. Old kingdoms fell, and new ones rose. The emergence of a new Supreme was synonymous with great upheaval… which is to say that there are few examples that I am familiar with. And yet, I did notice a certain similarity in how those people attained Supremacy."

He let out a wistful scoff.

"A Supreme is someone who claims rulership over the world, or at least a part of the world. Their distinct trait is the authority they wield. Naturally, it takes a lot of audacity to lay claim to the world — after all, it already belongs to someone, and already submits to a higher authority. So, in my opinion, the very essence of Supremacy is defiance."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Defiance?"

There was the unpleasant scraping noise, and Eurys nodded.

"Oh yes! It is a bit paradoxical, but the source of authority is defiance. After all, a ruler can hardly be ruled. Or at least ruled easily… there is a difference between authority and absolute authority, in the end. But that is beside the point. What I wanted to say is that if there is one common element between all the final acts of attaining Supremacy that I know of, it is that they were acts of defiance."

Sunny sighed and lowered his gaze.

He really did not want to sound like a parrot, but had no choice except to reluctantly repeat the same question:

"Defiance?"

Come to think of it…

'What the hell is a parrot, anyway?'

Oblivious to his momentary distraction, Eurys nodded again.

"Yes. And not just acts of defiance, but acts of supreme defiance. Authority and submission are antithetical to each other, are they not? You see… authority cannot exist in the void, since it is only revealed when imposed upon others. So, to claim authority and become Supreme, one has to defy some kind of authority imposed on them. That is what I think, at least."

He chuckled.

"That supreme defiance can take many forms, depending on the individual. Obviously, the more powerful you are, the less you are constrained by the chains of necessity, and therefore the greater your act of defiance has to be — because there are fewer forces great enough to impose themselves upon you, to begin with."

The mysterious skeleton sighed.

"So, some defy power by slaying an immensely powerful foe. Azarax only became the Plague of Steel after killing his Supreme father, for example. Others go against their own nature, defying themselves to gain enlightenment. Some use their will to twist the laws governing their Realm, gaining authority over it. There are many ways, but the surest one…"

Eurys paused, prompting Sunny to utter a quiet curse.

"Really? Do you really have to take a dramatic pause? Are you sure you were a slave, not an actor?!"

The skeleton laughed.

"Alright, alright… settle down! Is it not obvious, though? The surest way is to go against the greatest will of all… to break the will of gods. Well, they are dead now, so the next best thing would be to go against one of the absolute laws. If you manage to defy one of those, I am sure that you will become Supreme in no time."

Sunny let out a long sigh.

"Slaying an immensely powerful foe? Usurping a Realm? Breaking

absolute laws and going against the will of gods? Bastard! Aren't you just goading me into finding a way to kill you?! All of those are ways to get around the curse placed on you by Shadow God!"

Eurys coughed in embarrassment.

Considering that he had no lungs, that cough was not at all convincing.

"My, oh my! What a coincidence."

Sunny let out another growl, prompting the mysterious skeleton to shake his skull.

"No, listen… I might have a selfish motive in sharing this knowledge, but what I've told you is true. Those are indeed valid ways of taking the final step to Supremacy. You just need to find one uniquely suited for you… and then come back to try and kill me."

Sunny stared at Eurys for a while, unsure if he should trust him.

For what it was worth… the skeleton seemed to be sincere. He had no reason to lie to Sunny, anyway, since it was indeed in his best interest to help Sunny gain more power.

So, if Sunny was to take his words seriously…

'An act of supreme defiance?'

And not just any act, but one that suited Sunny best — one intimately tied to the very nature of his Aspect, his nature, and his forming Domain.

He grumbled:

"I've killed countless beings that were way more powerful than me, you know? How come I am not Supreme yet?"

The skeleton stared at him for a while, then offered helpfully:

"I guess they weren't powerful enough?"

A quiet groan escaped from Sunny's mouth.

"What are you talking about? I am a mere Transcendent, and yet I go around routinely killing Great Nightmare Creatures. I killed my first Sovereign back when I was an Ascended, in fact… granted, he was already consumed by Corruption and no different from a beast by then. Hell, I killed a Great Devil as a Dreamer!"

Eurys was seemingly taken aback.

He remained silent for a few moments, then mumbled in a puzzled tone:

"My, oh my…"

Then, the skeleton stared at him with reproach.

"Things are worse than I expected, then. You see, boy… since you are such an overachiever… since you are a damn lunatic who goes around slaying immensely powerful beings routinely, then slaying one more won't be much of an act of defiance, will it?!"

Sunny blinked.

"Hey, now…"

Eurys clicked his jaw a few times.

"No, really, who kills a Great Devil as a Dreamer?! You know what… I take it back. Why wait? Come kill me right now! There's no reason to wait, so do it now!"

Sunny tilted his head and stared at Eurys darkly. After a while, he said:

"You know what, I'm in no mood for your antics. In fact, I am tired, spent, and in pain. My soul is damaged, and my body is full of holes. How about you get over your indignation and give me actual advice?"

Eurys laughed.

"Well, I don't know. Have you tried… not killing something?"

Sunny frowned.

"I did. In fact, I was attacked by thirteen Saints recently, and I only killed six... wait, was it six? I think it was..."

Eurys lowered his skull in dejection.

'What is that bastard so dejected about?'

In any case, it seemed like he had exhausted the mysterious skeleton's usefulness — at least as far as attaining Supremacy was concerned.

Eurys had indeed shared his earnest observations… and they were helpful.

Although he had not provided Sunny with a definitive answer, he had at least shown him the right direction.

'One final step… an act of supreme defiance…'

Sunny fell into deep thought.

Breaking the will of gods and going against the absolute laws of existence was definitely out of the question.

…Wasn't it?

Noctis had broken the will of Sun God by liberating Hope.

Something had defied death by breaking free of the Shadow Realm, which was how its Fragment came to be.

In a way, Cassie had defied an even higher authority by conspiring to liberate Sunny from fate… even though the actual perpetrator of that liberation was the Thieving Bird.

He sighed.

'I don't need to be so grand in my ambitions.'

Eurys had said that defying the greatest authority was the surest way,

not the only way.

Most Supremes had attained their Supremacy with less drastic acts, no doubt. Azarax had killed a Supreme, but even that was not a necessity.

Simply defying the authority of a Supreme could also work.

Perhaps that was the way…

While Sunny was contemplating, Eurys suddenly spoke once again:

"Oh, by the way…"

Sunny looked at him somberly.

"What?"

The skeleton stared back at him for a moment.

"Nothing much. I just wanted to say... that you should probably hurry and leave this place, for now."

He chuckled.

"Well, if you want to stay alive, of course…"

Chapter-2128: That Which Should Not Exist

Sunny let out a tired sigh.

Even the seventh incarnation rolled its eyes in exasperation.

'Well, of course…'

Honestly, he had expected to hear something like that. After all, he was still in the Shadow Realm, and while the imminent danger had seemingly passed, it would be foolish to expect that new perils would not reveal themselves soon.

After cursing his fate — or lack thereof — for a few moments quietly, he asked in a resigned tone:

"Oh? What is it now?"

The ancient skull stared at him with empty eye sockets. When Eurys spoke, his creaky voice sounded a bit wistful:

"Look at me carefully, boy. How do you think I ended up in this state?"

Sunny studied the skeleton silently.

Eurys was sprawled on the ground, surrounded by broken pieces of ivory bones and half-buried in the obsidian dust. The bone fragments belonged to the remains of a Soul Serpent, but the human skeleton, too, was not intact.

Half of his ribs were broken, one of his arms was entirely missing, and his legs were completely crushed. He was in quite a sorry state…

Sunny did not know how powerful Eurys was, exactly, but he

shuddered to imagine what kind of creature could have mutilated him so thoroughly.

He glanced down, at the shadow archer.

"...I gather it wasn't this one here who did such a number on you?"

The skeleton laughed.

"No."

Eurys paused for a few moments, then spoke in a friendly tone:

"As I mentioned before, there is an entrance to the Shadow Realm hidden in the Abyss of the Underworld. We are not too far from that entrance, meaning that these are the outer edges of the Shadow Realm. This is where the shadows of living beings arrive after death before undertaking a pilgrimage to the heart of the Land of the Dead."

He sighed.

"I was attempting the same, but… oh well. You can see how I ended up."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What lies at the heart of the Shadow Realm, then?"

The ancient skeleton struggled to shrug.

"That, I do not know. I was curious to see, though! Such a tantalizing mystery. Since I am more or less dead, it would be a shame to miss the chance..."

After chuckling with mirth, he grew more serious:

"In any case, the outer edges of the Shadow Realm hide their own perils. Like the Creatures of Darkness who sometimes crawl out of the Abyss… one of them is drawing closer and closer, by the way. I thought I should let you know."

Sunny cursed.

'Damnation.'

Right… there had been the fourth dark drifter, the Wolf, pursuing the shadow of Condemnation. Sunny had assumed that it was destroyed by the essence storm, but the creature seemed to have survived. Considering that it had been on the ground when the storm hit...

'Did it burrow into the dust to avoid the currents of essence?'

He looked around, gazing past the field of bones at the desolate expanse of dark dunes.

Come to think of it…

Sunny glanced at the new hill of black dust that had formed where the shadow Condemnation fell. The dust used to be solid obsidian… had the Shadow Realm been a land of glossy black stone once, before turning into a desert of dust?

But that was beside the point. The point was that the Wolf was still alive, and drawing closer. It had failed to feast on the essence of Condemnation, but Sunny was right here. A Transcendent Titan was probably not as delicious as a Cursed Tyrant, but food was food.

Remembering the Vulture and the Leech, he considered if he could slay the Wolf alone.

Considering how tired and wounded Sunny was, it seemed problematic at best, and unlikely at worst.

He grimaced.

"So, am I supposed to run away from that Dark One?"

Eurys stared at him silently for a moment.

"Goodness… can you let me finish, boy? Who cares about those eerie things? I just remembered to mention it by chance. What I was going to say was that, while the outer edges of the Shadow Realm hide their own perils, the true horrors all dwell deeper, in its heartland."

Sunny blinked.

'...The essence storms and the Creatures of Darkness are not the true horrors?'

Noticing his pale face, the mysterious skeleton scoffed.

"You must have seen the shadows walking toward the center of the Shadow Realm, so think about it. The weaker ones get ground into streams of essence swiftly. The stronger ones last a little longer… then, who can endure long enough to reach the heartland?"

Sunny's expression darkened.

'He's right.'

The shadow of Condemnation had not been destroyed by the Shadow Realm… it had been killed by Sunny. If he had not been there, it would have rebuilt its colossal body and continued marching forward, at least for a while.

In fact, it might not have dissolved into essence entirely for years… hundreds of years, perhaps.

So how many of such shadows were somewhere ahead, in the heart of the Shadow Realm?

Or shadows left behind by even more powerful beings?

He shivered.

Eurys nodded.

"Indeed. Out there, in the darkness, dwell the shadows of beings beyond your comprehension. Cursed, Sacred… Divine, Unholy. Those that have endured countless eons of annihilation, changing slowly in the process. This feral shadow right here has already given you so much trouble, so how are you going to survive them?"

He paused for a few moments, then added in a troubled tone:

"More than that… out there, ahead, exist things that should not exist

at all."

This was the first time Eurys seemed to drop his jovial demeanor entirely, which did nothing to lessen Sunny's alarm.

He asked in a strained tone:

"What things?"

The white skeleton stared at him silently.

Eventually, the voice resounded from its depths once again:

"Creatures of Shadow… who have succumbed to Corruption. Oh, and they have sensed the scent of your Transcendent soul by now, without a doubt…"

Chapter-2129: Calculated Risk

Sunny was out of curses and out of tired sighs. He just stared at the expressionless skull for a while, then let out a short laugh.

"Ah. I see. Is that all?"

So, there were ancient shadows dwelling in the depths of the Shadow Realm… shadows so great and vast that even this place took eons to grind them into pure essence.

Shadows of dead deities, both divine and profane…

And some of them had succumbed to Corruption somewhere along the way, becoming monstrous beings that defied description.

Sunny glanced at Eurys.

"So… Shadow Creatures are not supposed to become Corrupted?"

The mysterious skeleton hesitated for a few moments.

"Well… it's not entirely impossible, I guess, but definitely unheard of. Unless one has been born as a Shadowspawn, Shadow Creatures come to be from the shadows of the dead. And death, as you should know, destroys Corruption. So, I have never even heard of a corrupted Shadow Creature — before witnessing one myself here. My, oh my! The world has really changed."

Eurys let out an amused laugh.

"In any case, unlike the shadow of my fellow member of the Nine, you have neglected to hide the scent of your soul when entering the Shadow Realm. They must have sensed it already. So, they will be coming for you soon. As such, I suggest that you run back to where you came from, boy, and return once you are strong enough to face

them."

Sunny smiled darkly.

He was inclined to listen to that advice.

Of course, there were a couple problems if he did… namely, the essence storm and the Wolf, who were currently between him and the Gate of Shadow. But he could solve these problems, somehow.

Facing an Unholy being or two, however, was not something he could solve.

Sunny sighed and glanced at the shadow of the archer, to whose throat he was still holding a sharp shard of bone.

After lingering for a little while, he said:

"I'll go. However, before that, I still have two questions I want to ask you."

Eurys stared at him silently, neither confirming nor denying that he would answer them.

The seventh incarnation gestured to the remains of the Soul Serpents towering around them.

"Why are these here? What killed them?"

The mysterious skeleton turned his skull a little, looking at the ancient bones.

"Nothing killed them. This is just their resting place. This is where Shadow Serpents come after losing their masters, to follow them into death… a sentiment you are not familiar with, it seems, considering that you are still here and running around without one. My, oh my! How callous."

Sunny hesitated.

"Why is the Shadow Realm so inhospitable to Shadow Creatures, anyway? To be honest, I did not expect to suffer this much in my

supposed homeland."

Eurys laughed.

"Isn't it the purpose of the Shadow Realm, to give solace and eternal peace to shadows? Ah, but not all shadows, of course — just those without a master, like the shadows of the dead. Or you, the shadow of a dead god."

Sunny blinked.

'What?'

So, if he still shared Shadow Bond with Nephis, his soul would not be slowly crumbling in the Shadow Realm?

Weirdly enough, it somehow made sense. Without a master, he was no different from the orphaned shadows that came to this desolate land after the beings casting them died. So, the Shadow Realm was trying to give him the gift of eternal peace…

By destroying him.

His eyes narrowed a little.

"Wait. So I can summon my Shadows here, and they will be fine?"

Had he been holding back for no good reason?

Eurys shook his skull.

"Those things you call Shadows are not exactly masterless, but they are not exactly real beings, either. They are a part of you, so they will be destroyed with you… much more thoroughly than you, really. Unless you complete them and turn them into real Shadow Creatures, I'd advise against bringing them here."

Sunny raised an eyebrow, startled.

"Complete them? What do you mean?"

The ancient skeleton sighed.

"Boy, they say that wisdom comes with age, but do consider that I spent most of my long existence nailed to a tree. What kind of wisdom do you think I was supposed to gain while hanging on a damned tree? I am not omniscient. How am I supposed to know more about the nature of being a shadow than you do? To answer your question, I have no idea. All I know is that unless they can exist independent of you, they are not complete Creatures of Shadow."

Sunny stared at him silently for a while, utterly perplexed.

So, according to Eurys, Saint and the others were not actual Shadow Creatures… yet? And that there was something he could do to complete them, thus giving them some kind of independence?

Weren't they quite complete, already?

And why would he even want to make them independent? The whole point of having Shadows was that they were always at his beck and call, ready to assist him with whatever he needed assistance with.

It didn't make any sense.

And he did not have time to deal with this issue at the moment, really.

Shaking his head, Sunny looked back to the shadow archer.

His face hardened.

After remaining silent for a while, he said:

"Then that leaves only one matter I still have to deal with. So, Eurys of the Nine… you told me that this one is one of the Nine, as well. What was her name, then?"

Alethea of the Nine had been a sorceress and a pursuer of knowledge, so he could not imagine her becoming a feral huntress. The archer had probably been someone else.

The white skull remained silent for a bit, then clacked its jaw.

"She doesn't remember, so I don't remember, either."

Sunny stared at him darkly.

"Somehow, I find it hard to believe."

The grinning skull just stared at him without saying anything.

Then, Eurys grumbled:

"Life is full of hardships, boy. What am I supposed to do about it? You said that you had two questions for me, anyway… and this is the seventh. I'm not giving you any answers for free anymore."

Sunny frowned and counted…

Why are these here?

What killed them?

Why is the Shadow Realm so inhospitable to Shadow Creatures?

So I can summon my Shadow here, and they will be fine?

Complete them?

What do you mean?

He gritted his teeth.

'That bastard!'

Looking at him, Eurys laughed.

"Go find her name on your own. Maybe if you give it to her, she'll regain some of what she lost."

Sunny muttered a curse.

A few moments later, the mysterious skeleton asked with curiosity:

"So… are you going to listen to my advice and let her be? Or do what you always seem to do and kill her? Let me repeat, just in case… doing so will be extremely dangerous. It is much better to just allow the Shadow Realm itself to finish her off."

Sunny stared at the shadow of the archer.

Eurys was right. Inviting this murderous shadow into his soul would be extremely dangerous, and it would be much wiser to let her live…

For a bit more.

Considering how severely damaged the archer was, she would without a doubt be destroyed by the Shadow Realm soon.

It was just that Sunny did not believe that one bit. There were countless reasons that pointed to the fact that the archer would not survive even if left alone, but he had survived too many impossible situations to feel confident.

That maniac… was a kindred spirit, of sorts. Even though the world itself was against her, she would find a way to live on.

He was sure of it.

And, more importantly…

Sunny was not one to let go of a grudge.

He smiled darkly.

"...I'll risk it."

With that, he strained his hand, and cut the archer's throat with the sharp fragment of the ivory fang.

Chapter-2130: Inviting a Killer Into Your Soul

Sunny said that he would take the risk — but really, he was quite concerned. He did not know what would happen next.

The first part was not at all surprising…

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

The Handy Bracelet might not have been enchanted to react when Sunny killed a shadow, but a Shadow Creature was different. He had some experience with that.

As soon as the voice spoke into his ear, Sunny felt a torrent of fragments rush into his soul — quite a bit less than what he had received after slaying the shadow of Condemnation, but still an amazing amount.

'Ah…'

He could feel subtle changes happening to his body, making him a little bit stronger. Even though he had already formed all seven cores, there was still one final feat left to perform — it was to saturate them fully once and for all. Before that, the familiar hunt for shadow fragments would still hold some meaning for him, albeit less than before.

Unless he found some other way to use them, of course… Nephis could burn her cores to unleash annihilating flames, for example, while Mordret could tear out pieces of his soul to create Reflections.

It was unknown, and quite doubtful really, that Sunny's Aspect possessed such a facet. If not… one day soon, he would lose an integral reason to hunt down Nightmare Creatures and seek more

power.

Sunny found the very idea of having no motive to kill unfamiliar. He had spent so much time being pushed to endlessly seek out battle — against beings who were his equals or possessed greater power than him, at that — that it had become his second nature. How would it even feel, to not have that need?

'Well… I'm sure I'll find some other reason to kill things.'

Or it would find him. When had the world ever allowed him peace and tranquility?

In any case, fully saturating his cores would most likely have to wait until his next visit to the Shadow Realm, whenever that might be.

Receiving a flood of shadow fragments was what he had expected.

The next part was shrouded in doubt.

As the ghostly body of the shadow archer convulsed and dissolved into black smoke under him, soon disappearing entirely, Sunny closed his eyes for a moment.

Two things could happen.

The first one… was that the vicious slayer would join the ranks of the still and silent shadows that populated his Soul Sea.

It was just that Sunny doubted that she would remain still and silent for long.

Eurys was right. This strange shadow had maintained self-awareness and lucidity — a form of them, at least — even after coming to the Shadow Realm after the death of the woman casting it. So, she would most likely remain rebellious in his Soul Sea, as well, either going on a massacre or simply endeavoring to destroy his soul from the inside.

Maybe both.

The second possibility was just as troubling, if not more so.

The slayer of the Shadow Realm was a Shadow Creature, after all… just like Nightmare had been.

And unlike the rest of his Shadows — with the exception of Serpent, who had been handed down to Sunny as a Legacy Relic by the Spell — Nightmare was not created by combining the silent shadow of a slain creature with their Echo.

Instead, as soon as Sunny killed the tenebrous steed, Nightmare had become his Shadow directly.

The same could happen with the nebulous slayer, which would root her essence in one of his Shadow Cores.

What would happen then?

…Sunny had no idea.

She would definitely not recognize him as a master, though.

And what would happen if a shadow that spent thousands of years hunting down other shadows got rooted in one of her killer's Shadow Cores?

Sunny shuddered to imagine.

He had a vain hope that the silent shadows in his Soul Sea would come to life again to protect him, like they had when Mordret challenged him to a soul duel.

But these situations were different. Sunny was still unsure how that facet of his Aspect functioned, and what had stirred the silent shadows into action. But if he had to guess, it would be that Mordret was an invader to his soul… a foreign body that had to be purged.

The shadow slayer, however, would not be. Rather, she would be a part of his soul, no different from the vast sea of still water, the seven suns of his cores, the Shadows that dwelled within them, the replica of the Nameless Temple, and the legion of lifeless shadows that now stood around it, watching the dark edifice silently.

So… he would decide what to do after learning which of the two

possibilities had come true.

Feeling a subtle change happening to his soul, Sunny glanced at Eurys.

"Well… I'll be going, then."

The ancient skeleton did not move, but the creaky voice resounded from the depths of its white skull once again.

"...Godspeed."

Sunny hesitated for a moment.

"You know, it would be much more convenient if I took you with me. Then, you would not have to wait for me to come all the way back here after becoming a Supreme."

Eurys chuckled.

"It took me so much effort to get to the Shadow Realm, and now you want me to leave. No thanks. What happens if you die before becoming Supreme? Your shadow will just waltz down here naturally, but I'll have to walk all the way back. And…"

He took a pause, then added wistfully:

"...I don't have feet anymore."

Sunny smiled.

"You also only have one arm. So… if I decided to take you with me anyway, you wouldn't be able to put up much of a fight, would you?"

The white skull stared at him expressionlessly for a few moments.

"My, oh my! Do try."

The tone was friendly, but somehow, Sunny felt a shiver run down his back.

He decided against it.

"Until we meet again, then. I'll give your regards to Nephis… oh, and by the way..."

His tone was friendly, as well.

"If I hear you call her an abomination again, I'll break your remaining arm."

Hearing that, Eurys almost seemed perplexed.

As Sunny rose to his feet, he mumbled quietly:

"What a bizarre thing to say. The world has gone insane…"

Turning around, Sunny took the first step.

It was then that he finally heard the words he had been waiting for:

[...You have received a Shadow.]

Chapter-2131: Shadow Slayer

Sunny had to get back to the Gate of Shadow to summon himself back into Godgrave. It was going to take him longer to return than it had taken to reach the Serpent Graveyard, though — both because he would not be riding the shoulders of the shadow of Condemnation this time and because he had to circle around the massive essence storm.

There was the last of the Darkness Creatures to worry about, as well. The Wolf was still out there, somewhere… relatively near and drawing nearer, according to Eurys.

But those were minor concerns. The real concern was the harrowing beings that dwelled in the heart of the Shadow Realm, and were apparently coming to consume him.

He could already feel a subtle, terrifying pressure at the outer edges of his shadow sense, dozens of kilometers away. It made him shiver.

That was why there was no time to waste, and why he had resolved the issue of the shadow slayer so hastily. Sunny would have loved to stay and talk to Eurys more, but his instincts were telling him that he had to run.

Or fly… that would be even better.

His original body was severely wounded and weakened, so it could not maintain sufficient speed. So, he intended to construct a powerful Shell around the seventh avatar and carry himself as he fled.

Before that happened, though…

'Argh!'

Sunny staggered and fell to one knee after taking only a few steps.

A piercing pain was ravaging his soul.

'She's... she's not wasting any time, is she?'

Gritting his teeth, he rose from the ground and dove into his Soul Sea.

By now, trained by having to control several avatars at the same time, Sunny could continue moving freely even while a piece of his consciousness entered the lightless expanse of his soul. So, even while he found himself surrounded by the familiar expanse of dark water, his two bodies continued to flee.

His Soul Sea had changed, somewhat, from the last time he visited it.

The still water was the same, but the dark ocean felt deeper. There were more shadows surrounding the replica of the Nameless Temple, tens of thousands of them watching it silently…

As if waiting for something.

The main difference, of course, was that there were now seven black suns hanging above the temple instead of six.

The dark sky of his soul… felt complete.

Sunny knew that six Shadows resided in these cores now.

Saint, Serpent, Nightmare, Fiend, Mimic, and the slayer of the Shadow Realm.

As he stared at his Terror Core, another pulse of harrowing pain washed over his conscience, making him groan.

'T—this maniac!'

As Sunny grimaced in pain, he thought he noticed a net of cracks revealing itself on the surface of the black sun.

The still water stirred lightly, and a cold wind blew across its surface, making the branches of the Soul Devourer's shadow sway somewhere in the distance.

The slayer he had invited into his soul seemed to have regained awareness… and was already trying to destroy one of his soul cores from within.

As the seventh incarnation called upon the shadows of the Realm of Death to envelop him and started to build a Shell, Sunny summoned the Slayer to the surface of the still water.

Soon, she appeared in front of him, wreathed momentarily in black flames.

When the flames were extinguished, Sunny could finally see the shadow of one of the Nine clearly.

...She looked much different from how she had been when they fought.

Only now that Sunny saw the Slayer in the darkness of his soul did he realize how tattered and frayed her shadow had been in the Shadow Realm. Now, however, she was restored to immaculate condition. The vague, elusive silhouette was gone, replaced by a figure as solid as he himself was. The billowing mantle of ghostly smoke had dissipated, as well, and nothing obscured her features anymore.

In front of him stood a beautiful woman with a slender and graceful figure, her build radiating a sense of extreme agility and strength. Her poise was unmistakably that of a warrior, and there was a hint of pride in the set of her bare shoulders.

Her luscious ebony hair was gathered into a long braid, and her lean muscles seemed to be sculpted by an obsessed artist… it was just that her lithe body was entirely black, as if cast from ink. In fact, there was not a hint of color that Sunny could see.

Well, it made sense. She was a shadow, after all.

…And a slayer of shadows, as well.

The Slayer was wearing a very light armor that consisted of a pteruges skirt, a chest guard, a single bracer, and greaves that protected her shins — clearly something meant for an archer, not a melee combatant. With how the light ensemble looked on her

graceful body, she seemed more like a dancer than a fighter, but Sunny was not deceived.

There were too many holes in his body to make such a mistake.

Her face, meanwhile, was hidden behind a veil — and yet, Sunny could vaguely discern her features. High cheekbones, a sharp nose…

And lifeless black eyes that seemed to stare at him with no emotion.

Sunny let out a careful breath.

Summoning a Shadow to appear in front of him in the Soul Sea was not the same as summoning them to the outside world. Here, they usually remained lifeless and passive unless he commanded them to come to their senses, as if in a state of stasis.

So, he could study them and their runes in peace.

'It seems I'm safe for the moment.'

Sunny stared at the Slayer, then shifted his gaze and looked into the shadow that served as her soul.

The rest of his Shadows possessed dark embers instead of Shadow Cores, but this one was unique. After all, she had possessed an actual Soul Core despite being a shadow — so, Sunny did not know what to expect.

What he saw was different from how the Slayer had been before, but also not at all like the rest of his Shadows. Her radiant soul core was gone, but instead of being replaced by a dark ember, it was replaced by a radiant shard instead.

That shard still remained in the same strange state — not quite Transcendent, but also not quite Supreme, as if lacking something.

'How do I learn her runes?'

Sunny was burning with curiosity… and more than a little bit of greed. He was quite excited to possess such a powerful Shadow.

Now that he was banished from the Spell, the most reliable source of information he had access to was Cassie. However, to get her to take a look at the Slayer, he would have to summon the murderous Shadow into the real world.

And she would probably venture to kill him immediately after that.

Thank the gods she was docile and passive here, at least…

Suddenly, Sunny felt a bad premonition.

'Huh?'

And a moment later, the dark eyes of the Slayer, which had been empty and lifeless before, slowly regained their cold sharpness.

Defying all the rules, the Shadow turned her head slightly despite not receiving a command to come to life.

And stared directly at him with murderous coldness.

Sunny gulped.

'Crap…'

Chapter-2132: Untamed

Of course!

Why the hell had he assumed that this crazed maniac would follow the rules?! The first thing she had done after becoming his Shadow was strike at the walls of his Shadow Core, after all!

His mind must have been more tired than he had thought…

At the same time as Sunny realized that the Slayer had shaken off the state of stasis she was supposed to be in, the Shadow already lunged at him. Sunny staggered back, barely avoiding her fingers, and fell on the surface of the black water.

They were currently in front of the steps of the Nameless Temple, some distance away from the silent shadows. Sunny glanced at them briefly as he fell, hoping that the legion of his past victims would surge forward to protect him.

But the shadows remained still and unmoving, not reacting to the plight of their master at all. It was just as he had expected… the Slayer was a part of his soul, so the silent shadows did not see her as an intruder.

'Damnation!'

Rolling over his shoulder, Sunny jumped to his feet and stared at the beautiful Shadow scornfully. At the same time, he commanded her to stand down.

"Hey, you! Now listen…"

His orders were absolute, as far as Shadows were concerned. Well… at least they were supposed to be. To be fair, his other Shadows were all quite loyal and obedient, never trying to resist his orders — except

for Fiend, who sometimes put up a small fight.

But even that guy was not serious about his disobedience, mostly putting on a show. After making his indignation or reluctance known, he always swiftly complied with whatever it was that Sunny commanded him to do.

So, he had expected that the Slayer would freeze in place.

And she did…

For a second.

Then, as if struggling against terrible weight, the Shadow moved once more.

Her movements were slow at first, but then accelerated beyond imagination, making blood run cold in Sunny's veins.

'Curse it all.'

The Slayer wore armor, no matter how minimal, but she lacked weapons entirely. Nevertheless, that did not matter at all — her entire body was a weapon, and she could easily rip Sunny apart with her bare hands.

Especially now that he was tired, and his soul was in tatters.

She was weakened by having to resist his direct order, at least — more so than she had been weakened as a Shadow Creature by having to defy the will of the Lord of Shadows, at that.

So, Sunny wasn't entirely powerless.

Dodging another strike, he tried to reason with the feral Shadow:

"Look around! Do you know where you are? What, exactly, are you hoping to accomplish here, you lunatic?!"

Instead of answering, the Slayer simply gave him a murderous glance.

Her gaze, full of infinitely cold killing intent, made Sunny shiver.

He took another step back to avoid a crushing strike and scowled.

What was he supposed to do here?

Fighting the Slayer again would be a problem… not only because Sunny could not retreat, thus giving her free rein to wreak havoc in his soul, but also because he did not want to destroy her.

Why would he destroy such a powerful Shadow after going to all that trouble to gain it?!

The alternatives, however, seemed grim.

If he left the Soul Sea, she would destroy his Shadow Cores and kill him… actually, she would probably massacre the silent shadows first, absorbing them and growing even more powerful first.

Of course, he could summon the Slayer back into the Shadow Realm and fight her there, thus saving his soul from her fury.

But that would just result in his bodies suffering more, not to mention wasting precious time. Apart from that, Eurys had said that the Shadow Realm would be much more destructive for Sunny's Shadows, so even if he won, he would probably lose the Slayer for good.

So, the only thing that remained…

Was what?

He blocked a vicious kick and was thrown back, almost reaching the first row of the legion of silent shadows.

'I guess… I have to restrain her.'

That was not an ideal solution, but the only one he could think of.

He had to put Slayer somewhere she would not be destroyed, but would not have the ability to further damage his soul, either.

Then, after she was restrained, he could come up with a way to tame her slowly.

In fact…

Sunny had noticed something when he was talking to Eurys.

His knuckles were split, and a few drops of his blood fell into the ghostly smoke shrouding the defeated figure of the Slayer. She seemed to react to his blood slightly.

Was that, perhaps, something he could explore further?

Another strike landed on Sunny, almost knocking his wind out.

It did not matter right now!

Angered, he snarled.

"I… said… STAND DOWN!"

The Slayer did not seem to react to his bellow.

…However, she did react to a vast presence that suddenly appeared behind her.

But it was too late.

There stood an enormous creature. It was a scaled beast with three long necks and three terrifying maws, its enormous body framed by vast skeletal wings. A black miasma flowed from the numerous torn holes on its body, spreading slowly over the restless surface of dark water.

Its size dwarfed both Sunny and the Slayer, making them seem like toys.

Before the murderous Shadow could react, the beast's claws closed around her, crushing her in an iron grip.

Sunny let out a relieved sigh.

"...Thanks, Serpent."

Indeed, the ghastly beast was none other than Serpent, having assumed the form of one of the silent shadows.

That of the Defiled Seeker of Truth, a Titan that Sunny had once slain in Antarctica.

Sunny was a Titan himself now, which meant that Serpent had become a Titan, as well.

And as such, it had the ability to turn into the form of the Titans Sunny had killed, as long as they were not of a higher Rank than Serpent itself.

Defiled Seeker of Truth, Goliath…

Winter Beast.

That was one of the main reasons why Sunny had wanted to venture into the Shadow Realm and earn his Titan Core.

Inhaling deeply, Sunny glanced at the Slayer, who was struggling to free herself from the Titan's inescapable grip, and headed for the Nameless Temple.

"Follow me."

…Soon enough, Sunny was standing outside the stone chamber that served as a treasury in the real world.

In the replica of the Nameless Temple, however, it had become a cell.

The Slayer was locked inside behind an iron door. She had already landed a few crushing strikes, both at the door and at the walls of her cell, but even her strength was not sufficient to damage them.

Sunny let out a dejected sigh.

'This is my Soul Sea, damn it…'

Apparently, now, there was a jail in his Soul Sea.

Shaking his head, he turned around and said tiredly:

"Stay put for now, Slayer. I'll deal with you later…"

Somehow…

He felt that rehabilitating his misguided sixth Shadow would take a bit of time... and a lot of effort.

Chapter-2133: The Youngest

In the tastefully decorated display hall of the Memory Boutique, which was located in the basement of the Brilliant Emporium — which, in turn, was a marvelous devil who hid a pocket dimension in its belly — a graceful young man was sitting calmly on the floor with his eyes closed.

In his hand, he was holding a small lantern carved from black stone. The gate of the lantern was open, and beyond it nestled an eerie darkness. A sense of chilling coldness came from its impenetrable depths.

Suddenly, the tranquil young man let out a sigh and opened his eyes.

In the next moment, two shadows suddenly escaped from the gate of the dark lantern, instantly turning into perfect copies of him.

Both were dirty and battered, instantly marring the immaculately clean floor with a layer of black dust. However, while one was simply disheveled, the other looked more like a corpse — especially due to how pale their porcelain skin was.

His black tunic was tattered and torn, and there were countless hideous wounds covering his body. The wounds were bloodless, which only made him look more like a cadaver.

Looking at the mess, the graceful young man dismissed the black lantern and pursed his lips.

Hunching, Sunny took a few ragged breaths and then looked at his gloomy incarnation.

"...What are you staring at, bastard?"

With that, he swayed and collapsed to the floor.

Now that he had escaped the Shadow Realm, all strength suddenly left his mangled body. It was partially due to the psychological effect of finally reaching safety, and partially due to the fact that he had been quite literally empowered by the desolate land of shadows.

Now that the borrowed strength was gone, Sunny toppled like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

Laying on the cool floorboards, he let out a pained groan.

'I don't think I can move…'

Not only did he find it difficult to move a muscle, but the pain he had been suppressing rushed in like a tide. Sunny felt his consciousness dim, and somewhere far away, the Lord of the Shadow stumbled subtly.

Luckily, the King of Swords had assigned him a long and annoying, but mostly passive mission — it was his turn to guard the base camp of the expedition force near the Vanishing Lake.

With Condemnation's death, the balance of power in the Breastbone Hollow had shifted, and many powerful Nightmare Creatures were on the move. More than that, the prolonged deprivation from sunlight was slowly starting to affect the ancient jungle, so the entire ecosystem was in a state of mild chaos.

But the abominations rarely approached Vanishing Lake, and therefore, Sunny merely had to stay vigilant without doing much of anything. It was a bit of a waste to assign the Lord of Shadows to guard duty, as far as he was concerned, but the King of Swords had his own considerations. In any case, the timely new assignment gave Sunny a few days of respite, which was a blessing in disguise.

Letting out another quiet groan, Sunny almost missed the incarnation's response:

"I am looking at two useless fools. What did you idiots do to our soul, huh?"

Technically, the seventh incarnation was innocent — it had not even been born when Sunny allowed his soul to be damaged by the

essence storm — but instead of retorting, the nonchalant guy simply gave the neat avatar a short glance and remained silent.

Sunny cursed.

"What did we do? What did you do?! Nothing! So who are you calling... damn, why am I even wasting essence on talking to you?!"

With that, he released both incarnations, allowing them to turn back into shadows.

The gloomy shadow gave the new guy an inquisitive stare. The eldest of the shadows seemed to be pondering the youngest shadow's character.

Actually, Sunny was curious too.

Truth be told, the seventh shadow — the last shadow — had been born in quite an epic way.

It had been born in the Realm of Death from the act of slaying an ancient god, and struck down the dreadful slayer of the Shadow Realm seconds after being born.

What could be more awesome than that?

Additionally, although the incarnation had been controlled by Sunny, it did display certain personality traits. It seemed aloof, nonchalant, cold, and calm in all situations…

Kind of cool, really.

'Did I finally have a normal shadow? Someone sane, sensible, and decent like me, not an unhinged lunatic like those six crazies?'

Sunny was excited.

Trying to distract himself from the pain, he strained to speak:

"Hey, you. The new guy. Look at me, will you?"

The seventh shadow lingered for a few moments, then looked at him

indifferently.

It was indeed cool.

But… how should Sunny put it…

There was something off about that nonchalant attitude?

Suddenly, a terrible suspicion crawled its way into his mind.

"N—no… now look at your older brother."

The seventh shadow did not move for a second or two, then slowly shifted its gaze to gloomy.

Sunny's eyes widened.

"Hey… hey!"

But there was no denying it.

The seventh shadow was indeed calm and nonchalant… but not because of cold aloofness!

Instead, Sunny felt like it simply couldn't be bothered to strain itself with such complicated emotions.

It was too lazy to bother!

In fact, its whole demeanor emanated a strong feeling of idleness and sloth.

The seventh shadow was fine doing nothing. It was enjoying the peace. It was content, relaxed, and a little sleepy. Having to follow all these bothersome orders was irritating, but even getting annoyed was not worth it…

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"You lazy bastard! How dare you be a letdown?! What a waste of an epic origin story!"

The lazy shadow just stared at him indifferently, not bothering to get

angry.

Sunny groaned.

"Damn… it's another lunatic! No, but why are all my shadows sick in the head? How come?! What can be the reason?!"

The two shadows glanced at each other.

Then, in perfect sync, they slowly shook their heads.

Chapter-2134: Deadly Rewards

The disappointing personality of the lazy shadow aside… overall, the trip to the Shadow Realm was a resounding success.

And yet, Sunny could not get over it.

'...But he's the shadow of the Titan Core! The youngest! The last one! The Titan!'

He groaned.

This time, it was not because of the pain, but rather because of a bitter feeling of resignation.

Laying on the floor and nearly unable to move, he stared at the ceiling with a miserable expression.

'Gloomy, Happy, Creepy, Haughty, Naughty, Crazy… and Lazy…'

Sunny was full of regret.

Not only because his last shadow was not as cool and heroic as he had hoped, but also because he belatedly realized how inconsistent his naming sense was.

'Damn. If I'd known in advance, I would have made all seven nicknames rhyme.'

But he was stuck with the seven fools now.

After suffering in silence for a while, Sunny tried to send a mental message to Cassie, but she did not respond. Either she was asleep, or simply too busy to answer — these days, unless the message was important, Cassie rarely responded immediately.

That was because the King of Swords was working her hard in the

Hollows. The blind seer was not exactly a battle specialist, and yet, he sent her out with the other Saints time after time — well, it was no wonder. After all, having a powerful seer lead the charge was a great advantage when venturing into an unexplored and dire area of a Death Zone.

Eventually, Sunny sighed.

'Let's go over what I gained.'

The first and foremost, of course, was his Titan Core.

Becoming a Titan empowered him in several ways. The most obvious, of course, was the increase of his raw power — his body had grown stronger, and his reserves of essence had grown deeper.

The changes were not game-changing, but also not insignificant. Every little bit mattered, and becoming more powerful by around one seventh of his overall strength could not be considered a little bit.

Sunny summoned his runes and looked at the counter of shadow fragments.

Shadow Fragments: [444/7000].

He had lost some to the Shadow Realm, but gained much more than what had been lost. He had won the race against time.

In fact, he had gained more than expected. If Sunny went by how many shadow fragments he had received for slaying Nightmare — a fellow Shadow Creature — then slaying the shadow of Condemnation, who had been a Cursed Tyrant, should have only brought him close to forming the seventh core… but not past that final threshold.

But he had clearly received way more than two thousand fragments, which would have been a reasonable amount. Either the rules were different when slaying beings of the highest Ranks, or something else had transpired.

'Huh.'

…Perhaps he had not just absorbed the power of Condemnation, but also the power of the Condemned — of those unfortunate souls that had been assimilated by the cursed god over the ages, becoming its parts.

That was the only thing Sunny could think of.

Which, honestly, was a chilling thought.

In any case, with the added fragments he had absorbed after slaying the Slayer — an ironic sentence to say, no doubt — the counter was not close to five hundred. There was a long way to go before he saturated his seven cores fully.

Full saturation did not matter much in the grand scheme of things, though, since it would only result in a marginal increase of power.

The other benefits Sunny had gained from becoming a Titan were much more important.

One of them had already shown its usefulness — it was the fact that Serpent could assume the form of Titans that rested in Sunny's souls. Not only was it going to be of great help in the battle against the Sovereigns, but it would also be an ace hidden up his sleeve. After all, the only thing better than a powerful tool was a powerful tool that the enemy did not know about.

Then, there was another benefit… the fact that he possessed seven shadows instead of six now, and could therefore augment his power eightfold instead of sevenfold.

Considering that his overall strength had increased with becoming a Titan, as well, that was a considerable — and honestly quite frightening — jump in power.

The power of a Transcendent Titan was no joke, and when augmented by seven shadows… Sunny shuddered to imagine what he would be able to do.

And there would be two such creatures facing against the Sovereigns, no less — he and Nephis. Their chances had improved.

Alternatively, these seven shadows could be used to augment one of his Shadows, including Serpent in the form of a Titan. That would be a terrifying sight to behold, as well.

Finally, there was the last benefit of becoming a Titan. It was that he could command one more avatar now, and therefore be in one more place at the same time.

Granted, Sunny felt reluctant to send any of his shadows away… now that the resolution of the war was drawing close, he felt a disquieting feeling that all hell could break loose at any moment. So, he wanted to have the ability to face the unexpected at the peak of his power, and preferably at a moment's notice.

'I'll have to consider this carefully.'

Then, there was something else he had gained in the Shadow Realm — his most unexpected reward.

It was all the knowledge shared with him by Eurys. There were too many striking revelations… as well as infuriatingly vague hints… in what the mysterious skeleton had told him.

In hindsight, the bastard was quite a master of subtly changing topics and steering the conversation away from undesirable truths. Of course, Sunny had not been blind to this manipulation, but what could he have done? It was not like he was in a position to force Eurys to speak.

In any case, he would have to go over everything that the skeleton had said and ponder it deeply. That was an important, but not urgent task.

And lastly, there was the most dubious of his gains.

The Shadow Slayer…

Sunny was lucky to have received such a powerful Shadow. At the same time, not only could he not use it, but he even had to protect himself from her. What was this situation?

Not to mention that he could not help but feel a bit torn about

whether he could even keep Slayer. After all, he had spent a big chunk of his life rebelling fiercely against having a master… so was it right to forcefully possess an unwilling Shadow?

Honestly, he would rather not, even if she was not really a human, or even a person. Merely a shadow of one.

But…

It wasn't like he knew how to give Slayer her freedom, or if it was even possible. Everything Sunny knew said otherwise, in fact. He could not even summon her and let her be, which would be an illusion of freedom… because his new Shadow was a murderous psychopath whom he could not in good conscience unleash upon the world.

Especially since she seemed hellbent on killing him in particular.

So, unless Sunny kept Slayer… his only other option was to destroy her.

But he was not ready to do that yet.

Laying on the floor, Sunny sighed and stared at the ceiling.

Then, he turned his head and looked at his left hand.

There, a sharp piece of bone was still held.

It was all that remained from the ivory fang of a colossal Soul Serpent whose skeleton lay among the black dunes of the Shadow Realm like a white mountain chain.

This piece of bone had destroyed both the shadow of Condemnation and the slayer of the Shadow Realm.

Technically, this was his final gain.

As Sunny considered what to do with the piece of bone, he heard a door opening somewhere above, and gentle light suddenly reached into the darkness of the silent basement.

Chapter-2135: Food Delivery

Sunny strained his tired body and turned his head toward the stairs, wondering who it was that had entered the Brilliant Emporium. Although the Ivory Island was not as desolate as before with the Fire Keepers back, few would come unannounced… let alone manage to get past the jaws of the Marvelous Mimic unharmed.

So, there were only a handful of candidates.

Cassie was far away, in the Hollows, while Aiko usually floated down the stairs instead of walking. So...

His question was answered shortly when he saw Nephis descending the steps carefully, her way illuminated softly by a floating Memory.

The graceful lines of her slender figure were a wondrous sight for sore eyes.

Sunny was so engrossed in marveling at the view that he momentarily forgot to greet her.

'...But what is she carrying?'

Indeed, Nephis held something in her hands. From his position below the stairs, that something… looked suspiciously like a tray.

A few moments later, a delectable aroma reached his nose.

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'Food?'

At this moment, the soft light of the luminous Memory chased away the darkness and shone upon his sprawled figure. Noticing him staring at her from the floor, Nephis froze for a moment, then turned away a little with a hint of embarrassment in her posture.

As if trying to shield the tray with her body.

"You… you are already back."

Her voice sounded confident and even, like always, but he could tell that she was a little startled.

She remained silent for a moment, and then added in her usual impassive tone:

"I just thought you'd be hungry when you come back. So, I brought some food over, to leave it… just in case."

Sunny stared at her for a bit, then smiled, feeling a strange and warm feeling soothe his aching heart.

"...Did you cook a meal for me?"

Nephis cleared her throat.

"Why? Did you assume that I can't cook, Master Sunless? Naturally, I can. I received an extensive education as a scion of a Legacy clan, after all, including advanced courses on meal preparation and nutrition. So, I am quite skilled in these matters as well."

Sunny laughed quietly, then grimaced due to pain.

'I'd better not make any sudden movements...'

At the same time, he thought back to their shared past. One that only he remembered, and treasured dearly.

His smile turned a little wistful.

"Oh, no… I know that you can cook, Lady Nephis. In fact, I even considered employing you as a chef in the Brilliant Emporium once."

These days, it was Sunny who always fed Nephis. He was happy to, and really, watching her enjoy the food he prepared brought him great joy. But in the early days of their tumultuous relationship, back on the Forgotten Shore, it had been her who always prepared food for the cohort.

Smelling the delicious aroma now, Sunny suddenly realized how much he had missed the taste of Neph's cooking.

'Those Legacy teachers are no joke...'

She tilted her head a little and gave him a dubious look, sparks of amusement igniting in her eyes.

"Me? Employed as a chef?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow and grinned.

"Why? The Lord of Shadows can work in the kitchen, but Changing Star can't?"

Nephis remained silent for a few moments, then smiled subtly.

"...Maybe one day in the future. I am a bit preoccupied, for now."

Then, her smile slowly disappeared, and as her gaze explored Sunny's sprawled figure, her expression darkened.

"But why are you on… you're wounded?"

Sunny coughed and hesitated for a few moments.

"Yes, I am a bit wounded. In fact, I am so wounded that I can't even hold up a spoon…"

Hurrying her steps, Nephis hastily descended from the stair and placed the tray on a display table.

"Hold on, I'll heal you."

Sunny gave her a pitiful look.

"Or, you know… you can hold me while you feed me…"

Her expression hardened.

"I'll heal you."

As Sunny chuckled, she knelt in front of him and placed her hands on

his chest. Soon, his pain receded, chased away by the warm wave of purifying flame.

His battered body was healed, and even his hurt soul was soothed, repairing itself with much greater speed.

This time, it took Nephis much longer than usual to mend his wounds.

Eventually, though, she was done… even if her complexion had become a little pale.

Knowing the price that it entailed, Sunny disliked being healed by her quite a bit. But he was not immature enough to voice his reluctance.

After all, seeing him wounded and suffering must have been just as painful for her as seeing her in agony was for him… well, maybe a bit less so. In any case, it was a gift she gave freely and willingly, and he would not answer her grace with bitter words of regret.

So, Sunny just smiled and said with relief written clearly on his face:

"Thank you."

Nephis remained silent for a few moments, then answered in a slightly subdued tone:

"If you are grateful, don't get hurt so easily. I… don't like it when you get hurt."

Sunny let out a quiet laugh.

"...It wasn't easy to get hurt this badly, you know? In fact, I worked really hard to receive each wound."

She gave him a reproachful look.

"So, what happened?"

He sat up, then glanced at the tray of food that remained forgotten on the table.

"Oh… I went to the Shadow Realm, killed a dead god, became a Titan, learned a few ancient secrets from a talkative corpse, and cut the throat of a shadow who had once been his companion."

Sunny smiled, then pointed to the food.

"I'll tell you everything in more detail, but… can I eat, first? I'm sure I'll enjoy the meal more while it's still hot… even if you refuse to feed me…"

Nephis blinked a couple of times.

"Sure. Go ahead, if you wish."

Then, as Sunny rose to pick up the tray, she suddenly spoke again:

"Wait. Did you say that you killed a dead god?"

Fully concentrated on the alluring view of a meal prepared by Nephis, Sunny nodded absentmindedly.

"Yes. It was just a minor god, though! Nothing to worry about…"

Chapter-2136: Ritual

"...And that was when I said goodbye to Eurys and rushed back to where I had entered the Shadow Realm, to return here. For what it's worth… I think that scoundrel was happy to know that you are alright. Despite the colorful words he used to describe you."

Nephis remained silent for a while, looking at Sunny with wonder. She had asked him a few questions here and there during his tale, but mostly kept quiet and listened intently.

A few moments later, she slowly shook her head.

"He is from the time before the Nightmare Spell ruled the world. He would not know what Nightmares are and how they function. So, he would not be able to guess that I received the Attribute of [Nephilim] after conquering the First Nightmare… he would simply think that I was born as one. Nephilim were children of an unholy union between the divine and the profane, so for people of that era, they would be more abominable than even those who had been corrupted by the Void."

She shrugged.

"So, don't hold it against him."

A moment later, a rare smile illuminated her face.

"Still. I am glad that he fulfilled his wish and reached the Shadow Realm. Our time together was brief, but I enjoyed his company."

Sunny looked at her with curiosity.

"Does it matter, though? Whether he is swallowed by the mist of the Underworld or destroyed by the Shadow Realm, the result is more or less the same. More than that… I think he was lying to me, from the

start. Didn't he tell you once that there was not much time for him left after being taken off that tree? So, it might be that he simply invented the whole story about being cursed by Shadow God."

Nephis contemplated his words, then shook her head slowly.

"I think… what he meant was that he would become mindless like the rest of the restless dead in the Nightmare Desert eventually, separated from the tree. And it does matter — it matters for him, at least. Think about it as a body being left for the elements or receiving a proper burial. For the ancient people, it was proper for the shadows of the dead to find peace in the Shadow Realm, so even if Eurys was denied death, he would still want his final resting place to be in the Realm of Shadow God."

She looked at Sunny and smiled slightly.

"It is better than the alternatives, in any case."

Then, Nephis chuckled quietly.

"But isn't it strange, to be talking about the Shadow Realm as the mystical nature of death so matter-of-factly, as if they were not supposed to be myths?"

Sunny shrugged.

"I guess? Is it stranger than fighting a war on the rib cage of a continent-sized skeleton, though? Or sailing through time inside a pyramid that remains far away no matter how long you travel in its direction? Let's be honest… our lives are not and have never been quite normal."

Nephis nodded, then looked at him seriously.

"So, the Shadow Realm… are you the only one who can enter it? Or can you take others with you?"

Sunny hesitated for a few moments.

"I am not sure if I can take someone with me into the Gate of Shadow. However, I used my seventh incarnation to leave a tether —

as far away from the heartland as I could, since I fear the beings who dwell there. So, I can bring someone to the Shadow Realm from the waking world. That said… I wouldn't recommend going. It is too dangerous, and it is only useful for someone like me. Even then, I am not planning on returning there any time soon."

Nephis sighed and nodded again.

"That is probably wise."

After that, her expression turned contemplative.

Eventually, she said quietly:

"An act of defiance…"

Sunny remained silent, thinking about what Eurys had said again.

After some time, Nephis frowned.

"It makes sense, somehow. The essence of Supremacy is not simply to have enough power to rule the world, but more so to have conviction powerful enough to make the world submit to your strength. To will it. And it seems that one has to prove the power of their conviction through an exceptional act… a ritual, of sorts, or a sacrifice."

Sunny chuckled, amused by her words.

"Conviction… funny you would use that word…"

But he understood what she was trying to say. It was not that attaining Supremacy demanded a particular ritual to be performed — it was that any act that resulted in attaining Supremacy would be a ritual by definition.

He had never thought of thinking about it as a sacrifice, though. That was also an unusual choice of words.

Had Azarax, the Plague of Steel, sacrificed his father to take his place?

In that case, what was Sunny supposed to sacrifice to complete the

ritual?

Suddenly, he remembered an old story that Nephis had told him once… the story about a great hero named Heracles whose divine self had become a god, while his mortal self had become a forlorn shadow wandering aimlessly in the darkness of the Underworld… the mythical version of the Underworld, not the real world.

He shivered, suddenly uncomfortable.

Eventually, Sunny sighed.

"In any case… we are running out of time."

Nephis looked at him somberly, then nodded with a sigh.

Sunny really did not want to say what he was going to say next, but there was little choice.

He took a deep breath.

"Anvil has already cleaved a path through the Hollow of the First Rib. Once the Sword Army emerges from below and the Lesser Crossing Stronghold falls, Ki Song would have no choice but to retreat. And when the base camp of the Song Army is surrounded… it would be only a matter of days before the Sovereigns clash. That is our deadline. Do you think we will attain Supremacy by then?"

Nephis hesitated for a while, then said evenly:

"I can't be sure of that."

Sunny nodded.

"Which means that we have to start asking ourselves a few difficult questions. And no matter what our answers are… I think that we need to change the plan a little."

He sighed.

'For better or worse...'

Chapter-2137: A Blind Girl Walks Into a Bar

Cassie was walking through the vast, abominable expanse of the monstrous jungle while keeping her hand on the hilt of the Quiet Dancer. A thousand scents assaulted her sensitive nose, and a thousand noises assaulted her ringing ears.

The humid air stuck to her skin, making her feel dirty.

She disliked the jungle a great deal.

For someone like her, who lacked sight but made up for it — somewhat — with enhanced senses, the sprawling, swarming, slithering depths of Godgrave were a burden. There were no straight lines anywhere here, no predictable patterns, no orderly spaces… no safety. Only chaos and appalling abundance, which threatened to overwhelm her.

Her Awakened Ability was not omnipotent, either. She could navigate the world with a level of confidence in places both strange and familiar, or even on a battlefield — at least for a while. But here, every step was a trial. There were bulging roots, thick vines, and old bones protruding from the ground. There were revolting spiderwebs, hanging branches, and swaying leaves…

And those were merely the mundane obstacles. There were swarms of pests with fatal bites, pits of digestive acid hiding beneath thin layers of scarlet moss, rotting trees that reached for prey with vermilion tendrils and pulled living beings into dreadful maws, and countless other horrors as well.

All in all, it was the worst possible place for a blind person to find themselves in… and for her especially, it was no different from hell.

But Cassie did find herself braving the depths of the abominable jungle, sent here by the order of the King of Swords. She remained silent and did not complain.

At least she wasn't alone.

Two other Saints were accompanying her on this mission, both suited for it far better — Cassie was able to navigate the jungle by borrowing their senses.

One of them was Saint Helie, who moved a few steps ahead in her human form while clearing the underbrush with the sharp blade of her xiphos — something that Cassie, to her embarrassment, was unable to do.

It was not that she could not swing her weapon at the hanging vines and the bristling branches. It was just that the Quiet Dancer often failed to cut them — not because the slender rapier was not sharp enough, but simply because the jungle surrounding them was too ancient and too potent, resisting the blade of a mere Awakened Echo… even when it was augmented by a powerful Memory.

Cassie sighed quietly. Even the weight of her armor felt unfamiliar — she had spent most of the last few years away from combat, wearing elegant gowns and enchanted tunics in opulent halls instead of donning chainmail shirts and steel cuirasses on the battlefield. So, she had neglected her soul arsenal, never bothering to assemble a set of combat Memories worthy of a Saint.

But one had to wear pants when entering the jungle. So, she was paying for her negligence now, feeling burdened by the armor.

The third member of their group was none other than the amicable old Saint, Jest of Dagonet, who walked behind her while using his cane to swat away the branches.

The three of them had been sent to scout the most distant and dangerous stretch of the Hollows — the interior of the First Rib. The King had already passed here once, subduing the most dangerous Nightmare Creatures like a natural disaster, but there was still some work to be done before the soldiers establishing a secure route to the

surface reached this finishing line.

Additionally, this place belonged to neither the Sword Domain nor the Song Domain. It was no man's land in the truest sense, making it the most perilous — if something happened to the three Saints here, the King would not be able to help them. He might not even sense that deadly danger had befallen his champions.

Cassie had other means of asking for help should something happen, of course. But Nephis was too far away, commanding the siege of the Greater Crossing… the Lord of Shadows was far away, too, back at Vanishing Lake. It would take him some time to arrive if she called, but simply knowing that there was someone she could call made her feel better.

Swatting a scarlet vine away with his cane, Saint Jest sighed behind her.

Then, seemingly bored, he asked in a mischievous tone:

"Hey, lass… Lady Cassia."

Cassie turned her head slightly, like someone who could see would. These gestures were meaningless to her, but they made others feel more at ease around her.

"Yes, Saint Jest?"

The old man smiled. She knew it because she was sharing his senses, and could feel his lips stretch.

"...What did a blind girl say after walking into a bar?"

Cassie blinked a couple of times... which went unnoticed due to her blindfold.

'No… he wouldn't. Would he?'

She cleared her throat.

"I am afraid I don't know."

The old man smiled wider and suppressed a laugh.

"...Ouch."

'He did!'

Cassie remained silent, not knowing how to react.

Old Jest, meanwhile, let out a stifled laugh.

"Ouch. Get it?"

Cassie forced out a smile.

"Oh…"

Up ahead, Saint Helie let out a heavy sigh and looked down, covering her face with a palm.

Jest stared at them for a few moments, then shook his head in dismay.

"Ah. You girls are no fun!"

Cassie briefly considered if his joke had been rude… but even if it was, she secretly enjoyed it.

Turning away to continue walking, she concentrated on the old man's perspective.

Saint Jest was indeed old — older than most Awakened, at least, being a member of the First Generation. However, he was as healthy and hale as a man in his prime. His body brimmed with ferocious strength, tempered into a flawless tool of murder by decades of relentless training. He was more imposing than almost any Saint she had ever met, even, as far as physique went.

His cane was just for show, as well. He did not have a limp, and all his bones were in stellar state.

…Which was a bit of a shame.

Because Cassie was almost certain that Saint Jest was planning to kill

her today.

Chapter-2138: Cleaning House

Cassie had lost the ability to perceive the future, so her suspicion was not based on any kind of prophetic vision. However, she was quite confident that the old man had resolved to end her life today.

That was because even without knowing the future, and with her memory of past visions in disarray, she still retained her analytic mind and the ability to come to conclusions based on deductive reasoning.

She also had a lot of unknowing spies supplying her with information, and therefore knew far more than she was supposed to.

Take the current situation, for example…

Nephis had joined the Great Clan Valor to destroy it from within, and spent many years enduring the hostility of its elders. Outwardly, nothing hinted at her deep hatred of the Sovereigns. Nothing revealed that she knew who had conspired to eliminate her father, and who sent countless assassins to kill her as a child.

She seemed like a willful, but faultlessly loyal daughter of a Legacy clan who selflessly served her adoptive family despite not being treated that well by it.

The King of Sword had no evidence to suspect her of contemplating treason.

However…

Anvil was no fool. He knew perfectly well whose daughter Nephis was, and what role he had played in the downfall of her family. Therefore, he would treat her with suspicion no matter what Nephis did or failed to do.

He would also know that if she was going to betray him, she would do so during the final days of the war. Because, reasonably, the only way to betray a Sovereign was to help another Supreme destroy them.

And people tended to adhere to reason… even if the subject of their suspicion was someone entirely unreasonable.

So, Cassie had anticipated the possibility that the enemy would move against them as the resolution of the war drew near.

Then came the order to depart on the scouting mission in the depths of the First Rib Hollow — the furthest and most remote part of the war theater.

It was already strange that the King of Sword had isolated Nephis from Cassie and the Lord of Shadows by sending them both away from the Greater Crossing. It was even stranger that Cassie had been assigned to the frontline.

Now, she was separated from Sunny, as well.

That string of unlikely events was too improbable to be a mere coincidence. Added to everything she had learned from her marks…

Cassie had become convinced that she was seen as a hindrance.

The most damning evidence was the identity of the two Saints who accompanied her on the mission.

One was the niece of a recently executed traitor.

The other was the King's executioner and hidden blade.

There was something strange about it all, however. If Anvil really wanted to get rid of her, he would not have needed such a convoluted scheme. He had a thousand ways to make Cassie disappear without raising suspicion… if he even deemed it necessary to avoid suspicion, to begin with.

However, he had not. Which made Cassie believe that this scouting mission was Jest's own initiative. Which meant that she was the only

one in danger, while Nephis and Sunny were still safe.

The way Jest behaved confirmed her suspicions, as well.

He was very subtle about it — in fact, he was almost flawlessly inconspicuous. The old man even seemed to have taken her Aspect into consideration, never betraying his true intentions even when no one was looking at him.

However, there was a small detail of his behavior that he had overlooked… a habit that all seasoned Awakened shared, and adhered to instinctively.

In the Dream Realm, where untold horrors dwelled, truly dangerous beings could sense when someone was gazing at them. Therefore, Awakened never looked at dangerous prey directly before the moment of attack.

Similarly, while seeing the world through Jest's eyes, Cassie noticed that he always kept her in the periphery of his vision, but never stared directly at her back.

Then, there was Helie.

One would assume that if Jest truly wanted to kill Cassie, he would have arranged for the two of them to go on a mission alone, to eliminate her without witnesses.

But that assumption was only reasonable if one did not know the details of Jest's Aspect… which very few people in the world did, to be fair.

But all Cassie had to do to learn the truth was face him once.

Saint Jest… was an insidious being.

His Dormant Ability could be either extremely powerful or completely useless, depending on the circumstances — he could intensify the emotions of a target, making them burn much hotter in their chest. Joy, mirth, affection, satisfaction… fear, hatred, sorrow, anger. All those and more were within his power to enhance.

His Awakened Ability was more obviously practical, allowing Jest to provoke anyone, or anything, into attacking him due to suffocating wrath. It was a powerful Ability that manipulated one's mind. It also benefitted greatly from his Dormant power… but it only truly shined when there was someone else there to take advantage of the enemy blindly attacking the wily old man.

However, it was Jest's Ascended Ability that made him so insidious.

His Ascended Ability… allowed the old man to switch the subject of a target's emotion.

In other words, he could provoke the feeling of uncontrollable fury directed at himself, and then transfer that fury to someone else — thus manipulating his victim into attacking anyone he wanted. At the same time, he could transfer the feelings of affection or protectiveness that comrades and companions naturally felt toward each other to himself, thus making them want to defend him.

So, while Saint Jest was undoubtedly powerful and insidiously lethal, having slaughtered countless powerful foes throughout his long and bloody life, his Aspect worked best when there were at least two enemies facing him.

Which was why he had brought Helie, whose loyalty was under scrutiny, on this mission as well.

To use her as a tool against Cassie, and get rid of them both to clean the house.

Taking another step, Cassie tripped on a protruding root and almost fell.

Righting herself, she sighed deeply.

No, truly… she disliked the jungle so much.

She detested it.

Did she really need to keep enduring this vile place just to be killed?

Shaking her head, Cassie suddenly stopped and turned her head

slightly, as if looking at the old man over her shoulder.

Then, she asked in a calm tone:

"Tell me, Saint Jest… is this far enough?"

Chapter-2139: Bad Timing

Cassie asked the question in a calm and composed tone, and yet, the air suddenly seemed infused with subtle tension. Perhaps it was due to the fact that she had stopped walking without giving a reason, or because Jest did not hurry with an answer.

Helie turned around and glanced at them with a look of confusion. Wet strands of her flaxen hair were sticking to her exquisitely beautiful face, so she sighed and lowered her sword to brush it back.

The old man leaned on his cane and studied Cassie with a wry expression. Then, he chuckled quietly.

"Oh, goodness me… I guess I'm not as slick as I thought I was."

With that, Jest sighed and shook his head in dejection.

"Comedy is all about timing, you know? That is why I just can't stand diviners. Most of them lack basic decency, if you ask me. People should have at least some tact, right? Who goes around learning the punchline before I even deliver the joke? That's just mean."

He stretched his neck languidly.

"In any case… dealing with seers is such a hassle. I should have known that you'd ruin all the fun, really. My bad! It's just that your lot has grown toothless in the last few years. So, I grew a bit complacent."

Cassie remained motionless, keeping her hand on the hilt of the Quiet Dancer.

"If it's any consolation…"

She paused for a moment, then smiled coldly.

"...You were never funny, to begin with."

Jest's eyes widened, and he looked at her with an appalled expression.

"Hey, now! There's no reason to get nasty!"

Helie interrupted them, her tone full of confusion:

"What the hell are you two talking about?"

Cassie took a deep breath. She was facing Jest, while Helie was standing behind her. Of course, it did not matter much because she was looking at herself through the eyes of both… still, there were limitations to human anatomy. Even if she was aware of what was happening behind her, her joints could not bend backwards. So, she was more vulnerable to attacks aimed at her back.

Still calm, Cassie kept facing Jest as she answered:

"We are discussing how Saint Jest intends to kill us both on this mission."

She paused for a moment, then smiled.

"...Oh, as well as his lack of comedic talent."

The old man scoffed.

"Lack of talent? It's not that I lack talent! It's that you dull people lack the capacity to appreciate it!"

Saint Helie looked at him, her eyes widening a little. Eventually, she asked in disbelief:

"That is what you are refuting? Not the fact that you were planning to kill me and Lady Cassia?"

Jest coughed in embarrassment.

"No, no… don't let her deceive you. She is completely wrong!"

Pausing for a moment, the old man flashed them a smile and added:

"I mean, I was only really planning to kill Song of the Fallen. As for you, Helie, I planned to see how it goes first. Who knows? I might even spare you, depending on what you do!"

Hearing that, Saint Helie frowned and studied him somberly, not saying anything else.

She did not seem that surprised by the sudden revelation — not surprised enough to ask for the reason, at least.

She must have known that after Master Orum was executed as a traitor, her entire clan would come under suspicion and remain on thin ice for a while. Before, Saints had been too precious to waste their lives — that was why Tyris of White Feather had only been exiled to Antarctica for killing a Transcendent retainer of Clan Valor, Cormac.

But now, there were far more Saints walking the world, and there was a war raging as well. Keeping potential traitors around could cost the King of Swords more than it was worth.

After a few moments of silence, Helie finally spoke.

"You know, that's the funniest thing you've said yet."

The old man looked at her with reproach and mumbled in a muffled voice:

"What's up with young'uns these days? It's like they don't respect their elders at all…"

Cassie remained silent for a moment, then spoke in a measured tone.

"I doubt that the King ordered you to eliminate me, though. You led us here entirely on your own initiative, didn't you?"

Jest studied her silently for a few moments, then shrugged.

"So what if I did?"

She frowned.

"Aren't you afraid of the consequences of going against the King's will?"

The old man smiled sheepishly.

"Oh. Well… I guess he'll be quite angry, won't he? But you know what they say! It's better to ask for forgiveness than to ask for permission. He'll thank me in the end."

Cassie shook her head.

"Is that what you call loyalty, Saint Jest? Aren't you acting too arrogant, assuming that you know what is good for the King better than he knows himself? That, too, is a form of treachery."

Jest simply laughed.

His laugh, however, ended abruptly a few moments later, and he looked at her with cold contempt.

"What do you even know about loyalty, girl? What do you even know about the King?"

He raised his cane and placed it on his shoulder, glaring at her with a dark expression on his weathered face.

"That boy, Anvil… I knew him from the day he was born. I watched him grow, mature, and turn into the fearless ruler he is today. That is why I know what he is capable of better than anyone… but I know what his flaws are better than anyone, too. He is too fearless, in fact. He fears nothing because he values nothing — not even his own life. So, someone has to value it for him, you know?"

Jest smiled.

"The King is not afraid of you, Song of the Fallen, but I am. I might not know what exactly you are scheming, but I can smell a snake when I see one. So, to protect him from your venom, I am going to cut off your head before you can bite."

With that, he looked at Helie and asked in a cold tone:

"So, what is going to be, Helie? Are you going to prove your loyalty by helping me kill her? Or are you going to force me into making you help me kill her? The latter will mean you'll have to die as well, of course. You decide."

As Cassie took a deep breath, Saint Helie hesitated.

Chapter-2140: Terrible Offer

Helie remained silent for a few moments, then asked in an incredulous tone:

"What, that's it?"

Raising her xiphos to scratch her forehead with its sharp tip, the beautiful Saint shook her head in bewilderment.

"You lured us into an ambush without the order from the King, and your only reason for doing that is that, according to you, Lady Cassia… smells like a snake? Do you have any proof that she is planning to betray the Sword Domain? Any witnesses? Anything at all?"

The old man chuckled.

"Orum must have told you who I am, and what I do… no? It is true that the three of us are here because I acted on my own. However, you should know that in my line of work, the King allows me quite a bit of leeway and discretion."

Saint Helie shook her head.

"Still…"

But before she could continue, Cassie suddenly interrupted her.

"Actually, it's true."

Both Jest and Helie looked at her in surprise, prompting Cassie to smile.

She shrugged with a nonchalant expression.

"Saint Jest is right. I have, indeed, been planning to betray the Sword

Domain. More than that, I have been planning to kill the King and replace him. I have been very busy planning this treachery, in fact. So much so that my plans are very close to fruition."

The old man looked at her with wide eyes and let out a disbelieving laugh.

"Wow! What a… flagrant display of duplicity. Have you no shame, lass? And why are you confessing all of a sudden?"

Cassie's smile remained unperturbed.

Turning her head, she addressed Saint Helie in a calm tone:

"So, Saint Helie… why don't you switch sides and help me kill this old fool, instead? Or you can listen to him and try killing me. The latter will mean… that you might have to listen to his jokes until the day you die, of course."

The beautiful Saint blinked, while Jest exploded with laughter.

"Hey, hey! My jokes are top-notch! Why are you threatening her with something so wonderful?"

Then, noticing Helie's expression, he raised an eyebrow.

"Hold on, Helie… you aren't considering her offer seriously, are you?"

But she simply kept silent, looking between him and Cassie with a ponderous expression.

Eventually, she asked:

"Not that it's remotely possible… but who are you going to place on the throne instead of Anvil? Actually, don't say it. I guess the answer is obvious, in hindsight."

Jest stared at her in bewilderment.

"You can't be serious. Really? Is this about that old fool, Orum? Listen… I liked him as much as the next guy, but Orum had made his own choice. No one forced him to betray Valor."

All warmth drained from Helie's gaze, and she looked at the old man darkly.

"No one forced Valor to execute him, either. How much harm could he have done after being discovered? Considering all that he has done for the Clan Valor and humanity at large, you could have let him live."

Jest scoffed.

"Goodness gracious, so filial. Fine then! Let's say that you really cared about your uncle Orum, but isn't your dismay a bit misplaced? Sure, it was the King's sword that ended his life… but it was this girl Cassia here who had callously interrogated him and sealed his fate! Both sides are complicit in his death, so why are you treating her better than me?"

Saint Helie stared at her sword for a few moments, then glanced at him with a dark smile.

"Maybe it's because of that last argument. You know, about not having to listen to your jokes anymore. That is an objective benefit, at least."

Jest's jaw hung open.

"What? What… is this nonsense? Are you really siding with the seer and her friend from the Immortal Flame? What can she even do? What can she promise you? The only thing she's capable of is shifting the odds in Ki Song's favor, and do you really think that the Queen of Worms is any better?"

He looked at Cassie.

"Go on, try to promise her assurances with a straight face. That'll be a hoot."

Cassie did not look away from the old man, but addressed the Saint who was standing behind her:

"I can't promise any assurances. However, if you decide to help me…"

Before she could finish, however, Helie said calmly:

"Okay. Let's do it."

Both Cassie and Jest were given a pause.

She had hoped that Helie would agree, of course — actually, she knew that Helie would agree due to hearing these exact words a few moments before due to her Awakened Ability.

But still. Should Helie not have considered her choice more thoroughly?

Jest coughed.

"Well, that's… whatever, I guess. It doesn't really change what will happen next that much. But I must admit that I am curious… why?"

Saint Helie massaged her shoulder, as if preparing for battle, and then answered evenly:

"I guess it's because I believe in Changing Star."

The old man stared at her incredulously.

"You believe in Changing Star?"

The beautiful Saint nodded.

"To be honest, these days it feels like the world has gone mad, and she's the only one who is still sane. I'm not the only one who feels that way, either. Honestly, both of your offers are terrible, so I'll choose the one that at least lets me hope that everything will be alright, somehow."

Then, she smiled.

"Oh… and I also don't want to end up fighting the Lord of Shadows. That guy creeps me out."

Cassie remained silent for a moment, even if she very much wanted to retort…

'But she's the maddest of them all!'

Which was a virtue, of course, considering the world they were living in.

Still, if Helie was inspired to feel hope, she was not going to take that away from her.

Unsheathing the Quiet Dancer, Cassie turned her head to face Saint Jest and slowly raised an arm.

"Let us not waste time, then. Any last words?"

The old man looked at her somberly.

Then, he grinned.

"What do you call a blind girl who walked into a bar?"

Cassie grasped her blindfold and pulled it down, revealing her beautiful blue eyes.

Saint Jest took a step forward, his grin turning dark and sinister.

"...An ambulance!"

With that, everything exploded into madness.

Chapter-2141: The Good, the Bad and the Centaur

Lost in the depths of a Death Zone and facing one of the most prolific killers of the Legacy regime, Cassie remained calm.

Why would she feel agitated?

Yes, Saint Jest was powerful. And she had indeed been lured here to be slaughtered — the old man was a deadly predator, while Cassie was his hapless prey.

Or so it seemed.

In truth, she was a predator herself. It wasn't just Jest who had wanted to lure Cassie away from her allies — she had wanted to get him alone and away from the King of Swords for the longest time, too.

After all, the old man was her target. He knew a great deal of secrets, and Cassie wanted… needed… to learn what he knew.

So, she had followed him into the jungle willingly.

Saint Jest was here to deal with her, while she was here to deal with him. The only unfortunate person among them was Helie, who had gotten entangled in their secretive clash against her will.

But Cassie could not do anything about that, at the moment. The best she could do was try to keep Helie alive until Jest was defeated.

Of course… it wasn't entirely clear if they could defeat him.

As Jest took a step forward, Cassie experienced the strangest sensation.

She was currently perceiving the world from three points of view — her own, the old man's, and Helie's. Additionally, each of these perspectives was split into two, one corresponding to the present, the other to a point several moments in the future.

The connections to the rest of her marks were temporarily deactivated in order to conserve soul essence.

In the present, Cassie was preparing to deflect Jest's first attack. But in the future…

Her body was behaving strangely. There was an odd and sickening sensation settled somewhere in the pit of her stomach, and her limbs were trembling. Her pupils were dilated, and cold sweat was rolling down her back. She was slow and sluggish, failing to react to the enemy's movements in time.

'How curious.'

Cassie could perceive what her body would feel in the near future as far as its four remaining senses were concerned: touch, smell, taste, and hearing. The same went for more mystical senses, like the ability to feel the flow of soul essence. However, she could not perceive her future thoughts and emotions.

That was why she often felt lost when sensing the physical effects of future powerful emotions. It was like learning the answer without knowing the question… in the case of her strange state in the near future, though, the cause was easy to deduce.

Cassie would be imminently weakened by an overwhelming fear.

She was not too afraid, though. Of course, she felt tense and apprehensive about facing the infamous butcher of Valor, Saint Jest, in combat… but even if there was a sliver of fear hiding deep in her heart, it was small and miniscule. Not at all powerful enough to be debilitating.

But that was the nature of the enemy.

As Cassie started to take a step back, she felt it…

Her small fear suddenly surged like flame, uncontrollable, enveloping her entire being and turning into primal terror.

"Ah…"

Her legs trembled. Her eyes opened wide. Her heart shuddered like a wounded animal, and a terrified scream died somewhere in her throat, with only a weak squeal escaping from between her lips.

Even knowing that it was merely the effect of the old man's Dormant Ability, which allowed him to intensify emotions, Cassie could not suppress the fear that grasped her limbs like a heavy chain.

Therefore, she was a moment too late to deflect Jest's blow.

His cane fell from above, whistling as it tore the air, aiming to crack her skull open — only to collide with Quiet Dancer, who put herself between Cassie's head and the enemy's weapon on her own.

Echoes, after all, knew neither thoughts nor emotions. Therefore, her loyal rapier was utterly fearless.

It was too weak to resist the power of a Transcendent killer, though. The wooden cane easily batted the Quiet Dancer aside, sending her flying far away… the collision slowed the cane down a little, though, just enough to let Cassie dash back.

Creating some distance between her and Jest, she froze for a moment.

The old man looked at her with a smile.

"How interesting. Few people have ever managed to dodge my attack, you know?"

He was indeed fast enough to startle even a Saint, striking without a hint of doubt or hesitation. If Cassie had not perceived the attack in advance, she would not have had time to react and give the Quiet Dancer a command.

Taking a deep breath, Cassie considered Jest somberly.

With her left hand, she unsheathed a long parrying dagger and put it

between herself and the old man. The dagger was a Transcendent Memory of the Third Tier, and usually served as a partner to Quiet Dancer.

At the same time, she deactivated the charm that hung on a silver chain around her neck. This one was a Memory forged by one of the Spellsmiths of Valor, and its function was to bestow a powerful augmentation on an Echo. The charm had been a potent tool when she was a Master… but after becoming a Saint, Cassie quickly started to feel that it was lacking.

So, she had endeavored to make it stronger. In the end, the King of Swords himself had reforged it as a reward for her service, turning the charm into a Transcendent Memory — and a very powerful one, at that. It was the reason why the Quiet Dancer had been able to keep up with the demands of the battlefield so far.

But no matter how Cassie loved the Quiet Dancer, she knew that her rapier would not be able to contend against Saint Jest. And as one of her two most powerful Memories, the forged charm consumed a lot of essence. There was no justification to waste any, right now.

After all, Cassie only possessed one soul core — unlike Nephis and Sunny. She had to be conservative when managing her essence in a dire battle.

So she activated the enchantment of her most powerful Memory, instead.

It was another charm, which she had received in the Third Nightmare from Nephis… a Supreme Memory of unknown origin that could improve the material properties of other objects, making weapons sharper and armor more durable.

Only, this time, she did not use it on the Quiet Dancer. Instead, she augmented her dagger, making it even sharper and more durable than it had been already.

At the same time, Cassie activated the enchantment of a simple ring that adorned one of her fingers. With that, her mental resistance was boosted, and the terror strangling her heart grew a little less

suffocating.

Glancing at Helie, Cassie forced out a smile.

"Be wary."

In the next moment, she lunged forward and tried to sink her dagger into Helie's heart.

Chapter-2142: Three Flawed Foes

'W—what?'

Even as Cassie delivered the attack, she felt that something was wrong. But she could not understand what...

It was so strange.

A few moments ago, she clearly perceived attacking the loathsome enemy. She had even noted how sharp her movements would be, and how determined her attack was going to feel. As if her entire being was consumed by the burning resolve to defeat her foe.

Naturally, she knew that her enemy was Jest.

But then, when the future she had perceived finally arrived…

Suddenly, she felt consumed by incinerating wrath, feeling like she had to kill the enemy at all costs. Even knowing that she was being taunted by the old man's Awakened Ability, Cassie nevertheless lunged at the odious, hateful figure in front of her.

Only that figure was not Saint Jest — the old man whom she had to protect and keep alive until the battle was over. Of course, it was the woman with beautiful features and long flaxen hair, Saint Helie, whom she hated with all her heart.

She almost managed to pierce Helie's heart when the beautiful Saint staggered back, deflecting the blow with the blade of her xiphos.

"Cassia! What the…"

'I'm being influenced.'

Of course, she was.

Cassie froze for a moment, suddenly troubled.

It was at that moment that her wrath was replaced by disorientation and confusion, while Helie's eyes ignited with scathing loathing.

The old man wasn't just watching them fight, either. He was already drawing close, his wooden cane raised to deliver a fatal blow.

The cane was going to plummet, aimed at her head.

Helie's xiphos, meanwhile, would shoot toward her heart.

More than that, Cassie could not quite determine where Jest was anymore, because she suddenly became half-blind. One of the two points of view through which she gazed upon the world had gone dark.

She could still see what Helie could see, and feel what Helie felt. But while she could sense through Jest, she could not see what he saw… for some reason.

Well, it was easy to explain. The old man must have simply closed his eyes.

She was in danger.

She was going to die.

Luckily, danger and death were still a few moments away, because she was perceiving what would happen shortly in the future.

So, Cassie moved.

Turning her body, she allowed for the xiphos to slide past her body without ever touching it. At the same time, she raised her arm and caught the falling cane with the crossguard of her parrying dagger, twisting it into a collision with Helie's sword and stepping back to disengage at the same time.

The force of the impact sent a painful shudder through her body and

made her bones groan in protest.

'Just… how strong is he?'

And why was Jest attacking her? Weren't they allies?!

No, they... they were, weren't they? She had to... make sure that he survived the fight...

In the next few moments, both Helie and the old man unleashed a barrage of attacks on Cassie. Both were powerful Saints and masters of combat, but despite that, she managed to avoid their blows. Her technique was elegant and precise, but more than that, it was eerily graceful.

Physically, Cassie was clearly weaker than both of her opponents. And yet, she moved as if anticipating their every move, seemingly reacting to attacks before they even thought of delivering them. She dodged and evaded some, often missing the enemy weapons only by a few millimeters, while deflecting others with her dagger in a way that dissipated and redirected most of the force.

There were also the bracelets she wore on her wrists. One seemed to be capable of enhancing the strength of her own attacks, while the other was a protective charm, creating a small repelling field in front of her hand from time to time. That bracelet saved her from a few blows that the dagger had failed to stop.

But each time she used it, some of her essence was burned.

Cassie only seemed to attack Helie, defending herself against Jest while showing stubborn determination to keep him alive. Helie, meanwhile, was too overcome with mad wrath to attack anyone except the blind seer, so the old man remained completely unscathed.

A few dreadful moments later, the three Saints jumped away from each other, pausing briefly to reevaluate their enemies.

Cassie was breathing heavily, and blood was seeping from a thin cut on her cheek. She faced Jest and Helie, visibly confused, her breathtaking beauty accentuated by the glimmers of light shining in her enchanting, unseeing blue eyes.

The old man shook his head in dejection and furtively opened one of his own eyes to take a look around.

"Ah… it seems that this one will be troublesome. I really should have known! You always remained so quiet, so subservient, so unassuming… to the point that it was often hard to remember that you even exist, lass. Who knew that you were such a fiend with a blade? Ha! Consider me fooled."

He shook his head and glanced at Helie.

"And what's up with you? Use your Aspect, foolish girl!"

The beautiful Saint ground her teeth.

"I… can't…"

The old man raised an eyebrow.

"Huh? What's that? Surely, you are not low on essence?"

Helie grimaced.

"No… I can't use it… unless my emotions are in check!"

Jest frowned, then suddenly exploded with laughter.

"What? Wait… is that your Flaw? You can't use your powers unless you're calm? Well, that will make things easier, at the end."

Helie simply threw a dark glance at him, struggling to contain her fury.

Her lips twisted in contempt.

"What are you doing yourself, old man? Summon a damn Memory! She will kill us both if this goes on!"

Jest hesitated for a moment, then smiled.

"Well, since neither of you are coming back from this hike, I guess I'll tell you a secret. Actually, I too have a regrettable Flaw. I can't use enchanted items. Therefore, I don't even possess a single Memory.

What, did you think I was walking around with this cane for fun?"

He snorted.

"It was carved from nearly indestructible wood, of course. And it's really dapper… but I don't really fight with it often. In truth, I prefer to kill my victims with bare hands. It's much more enjoyable that way."

Noticing that both Cassie and Helie were looking at him strangely, Jest raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

Cassie, who had been trying to catch her breath and subdue the tremors running through her hands, answered quietly:

"No… it's just surprising. Everyone assumed that your Flaw has to do with a terrible sense of humor."

Jest stared at her for a few moments, then gave her a sinister smile.

"What nonsense is that? You rude child… hey, Helie! Don't worry about this one. She might seem dangerous, but that is only because she is a cheater. Seers are like that — they are indeed difficult to handle, but there's a simple trick to dealing with them. We just have to exhaust her essence. Once she loses the power of her Aspect and becomes defenseless, I'll snap her neck and rip off her pretty head, no problem. That'll be quite funny, don't you think?!"

Staring at her darkly, the old man grinned.

"Let's get serious, then."

With that, he dropped his cane. His body twisted, starting to transform.

Suddenly, Cassie was overcome with fear once again — this one her own, not summoned by the power of an enemy Aspect.

She smiled tiredly.

"Too late, old man. I figured you out."

At that moment, without making any noise, the Quiet Dancer finally returned, shooting from the dense canopy of the jungle at stunning speed.

It was aimed at Helie's back…

But just a moment before piercing her flesh, the graceful rapier pivoted in the air, and streaked toward Saint Jest instead.

Chapter-2143: Thoughts and Emotions

Cassie moved.

The Quiet Dancer flashed past Helie, her narrow tip aimed at the old man's heart. However, a split second later, when the graceful rapier pierced the red fabric of his dapper shirt… it came to a sudden halt, its hilt quivering in the humid air.

The narrow tip had barely cut Jest's skin, drawing a few drops of blood, but failed to plunge deeper. His muscles were like steel, resisting the sharpness of the Awakened blade with transcendent resilience.

The gallant old man was nowhere to be seen, either.

Instead, a towering abomination stood in his place, looking down at Cassie with chilling malevolence. The creature was vaguely humanoid in shape, with a muscular human torso and furry goat-like legs. Its face was a disturbing mix of human and bestial features, with two curved horns protruding from its grotesque head.

The most eerie part was that Cassie could still recognize Jest's features in the bestial face, and see her own distorted figure reflecting in his sinister rectangular pupils.

She did not know whether his Transcendent form was supposed to be a devil or a satyr… in any case, he looked like a fiend.

As a vicious grin twisted the fiend's lips and his cloven hooves dug into the scarlet moss…

Cassie grasped the hilt of the Quiet Dancer, augmented the slender rapier with the power of her Supreme charm, and pushed the narrow

blade deeper with all her Transcendent strength.

"Ho…"

A low, inhuman laugh escaped from Jest's mouth. Now almost twice as tall as Cassie, he easily batted the slender rapier away with his clawed hand and thrust the other one forward, aiming to grab her head and crush it in his fist.

Even knowing what was coming, she barely had time to jump away.

Jest looked down, at the thin stream of blood trickling from the small cut on his chest, and grinned.

His unnaturally deep, dark voice sent shivers running down Cassie's back.

"That tickles a little. Still… you should be proud of yourself, little girl. You made me bleed. Few ever managed."

He crouched, preparing to lunge forward.

"How did you even manage to attack me, anyway?"

Cassie did not waste time responding — but actually, it was simple.

Jest's insidious Aspect allowed him to play with his victim's emotions, manipulating living beings like obedient puppets, but its very power was also its weakness.

Because while people were usually hostages of their feelings, they also possessed the capacity for rational thought. Most of the old man's enemies did not know what his powers were, and therefore lacked the ability to understand how they were manipulated.

But Cassie was different.

Knowledge was a heavy burden, but it was also the origin of power — and in that sense, she wielded more power than most. She knew exactly what Jest was capable of, and so, she knew not to trust her emotions when facing him.

Of course, there was a vast difference between knowing not to trust one's feelings and actually being able to disregard them. After all, the crippling fear he had induced in her did not disappear simply because she realized its artificial source.

Currently, Cassie felt two powerful emotions.

A scathing hatred and fear of Helie, whom she wanted to kill with an almost uncontrollable intensity, and a good measure of trust and favor toward Jest, whom she wanted to keep alive with all her heart.

But she also knew that these feelings were supposed to be reversed.

The powerful emotions ruling her heart were clashing with the rational thoughts borne of her mind, which left her torn and dazed. Even knowing better, she could not help but want Helie dead — want it more than she wanted anything else, to the point that the very idea of failing to kill Helie made her tremble in rage. So…

Cassie ignored her emotions.

It wasn't that hard to do, really — at least for her. In truth, Cassie had long learned to build a wall between herself and what she felt. Otherwise, it would have been too easy to lose herself in the endless lives she experienced through her marks, countless foreign memories she saw, and all the fleeting versions of the future she felt.

She knew so much, and she had experienced so much. Every time she stepped on the battlefield, she had to die a thousand times in order to survive once. Every time she experienced the vibrant beauty of the world through someone else's eyes, she was tempted to abandon the dark confines of her own bleak existence forever.

...If anything, it was hard not to allow herself to grow unfeeling and numb.

Jest seemed surprised that Cassie had managed to shake off his compulsion, but in reality, she had not.

She simply steeled her heart and willed herself into following cold logic instead of her fleeting and unreliable emotions.

So, Cassie resolved to kill the one whom she wanted to protect, and save the one whom she wanted to kill.

That was how she was able to attack Jest instead of Helie.

Sadly… that did not mean that she would immediately win the battle.

Far from that, in fact.

"Ah!"

Cassie dashed back, parrying Helie's attack with her dagger, and was a split second too slow to evade Jest's claws. They tore through her armor and left deep cuts on her side, hot blood streaming down her thigh.

She had known when and where the attack would come from. But she was still too slow to avoid it because the goat-like abomination was simply too fast and ferocious, moving so swiftly that there was no possible future where she had avoided both blows.

Raising the bloodied claws to his bestial face, Jest smiled.

"Well… so what if you can attack me? There are still two of us, and only one of you. How much essence do you have left, lass? Why don't you just give up this tired routine and accept your fate?"

As Cassie heard these words, her expression suddenly froze, and an eerie presence suddenly enveloped the jungle, making the old man frown for a moment.

Her lips moved, and a quiet question escaped from them.

"Accept… fate?"

Cassie's unseeing eyes suddenly ignited with dangerous light.

Lowering her head slightly, she gritted her teeth and then smiled wickedly.

"Why do you insist on constantly running your mouth, old man? Just

die quietly!"

Snarling, she pushed herself forward.

Chapter-2144: Look Into the Eyes of Monsters

The battle had turned more ferocious after Jest assumed his Transcendent form and Cassie reclaimed the Quiet Dancer. Before, the three Saints had merely been testing each other's power — now, they grew serious about killing each other.

The ancient jungle was shaken by the fierce clash of the three Transcendent humans. A swath of it was devastated entirely, with dozens of trees being cut, splintered, and toppled by the dire forces unleashed by each of the fighters.

Jest was like a demon that had crawled out of the deepest reaches of a dark hell, moving with both the bestial might and the cold, calculated malice of an experienced killer. Helie was consumed by intoxicating wrath, allowing her honed martial excellence to turn into a violent, destructive calamity.

Cassie remained calm and composed, facing them both with the grace and measured precision of a talented swordsman trained by Changing Star herself. But there was a ruthless coldness and scathing killing intent in her movements now, too.

But despite that…

She was still slowly losing ground. Jest had no problems with using Helie as a living shield to protect himself against her biting attacks, and while Cassie wanted nothing more than to kill her, she had to hold herself back.

She barely managed to keep herself alive in the furious whirlwind of deadly attacks. Jest's malice and Helie's wrath left bloody marks on her body, but they weren't able to bring her down… at least not yet.

Despite that, the situation did not look good.

It seemed desperate, in fact.

Eventually, Cassie managed to send Helie staggering by bashing her in the head with the pommel of her dagger. The beautiful Saint swayed and fell to one knee, her flaxen hair soaked with blood. She raised one hand and pressed it against her temple, dazed, then tried to stand up — only to fall once again, opening herself to a fatal blow.

Cassie had to use all of her self-control to stay her hand.

By then, her armor was broken and battered, and a dozen shallow wounds covered her body. Her breath was hoarse and labored, too, with sweat rolling down her pale face. She activated the enchantment of her protective bracelet to block a devastating swipe of Jest's clawed hand and was sent reeling by the recoil, a quiet groan escaping from her lips.

"Didn't you make a mistake, lass?"

Jest's inhuman voice was full of mockery.

Indeed, she had.

Removing Helie from the battle might have been a boon, since it only left one enemy for Cassie to deal with — the one whom she really needed to defeat.

However…

With the cunning old man still keeping his eyes closed, Helie was the only source of sight for her. Now that the beautiful Saint was dazed and disoriented, her vision blurred and painted red by flowing blood, Cassie was once again fully and utterly blind.

"You know how it goes… one mistake is all it takes…"

Jest's inhuman voice was so deep that it was hard to determine which direction it was coming from. She could still perceive his other four senses, so she could guess in which direction he was moving — but that was hardly enough to survive.

Even her foresight did not guarantee salvation, since the horned fiend was strong and swift enough to be inescapable.

Backing away with a frightened expression on her exquisitely beautiful face, Cassie raised her weapons and prepared to defend herself.

"Too late!"

She felt the air moving as something massive and murderous lunged at her... from a different direction than where the shout had come from a moment earlier.

Cassie stumbled and fell, barely avoiding one of Jest's hands.

But she was not saved…

On the contrary, she was cornered.

It was at that moment, when the terrible creature reached forward to rip her apart, that Cassie deactivated her Supreme charm and poured her essence into the Transcendent Memory meant to augment her Echo, instead.

However, she was not augmenting the Quiet Dancer.

'Got you.'

In the last moment, Jest seemed to notice that instead of looking terrified, Cassie had a subtle smile playing on her soft lips. But with the enemy wounded and defenseless in front of him, he had allowed himself to get consumed by the thrill of the hunt. He had committed to the attack too much, and therefore, failed to react in time.

So, he had no choice but to finish it…

But he never got the chance.

Because just then, a terrifyingly strong tentacle wrapped itself around his neck, squeezing it cruelly.

Jest's momentum was broken, and his claws swiped the air in front of

Cassie's neck fruitlessly.

Before he could resist, more tentacles wrapped themselves around his arms and legs, binding him like slippery chains.

'W—what… what the hell…'

If Jest could turn his head, he would have seen that the dark tentacles were stretching from beneath a beautiful red dress covering a delicate, deceptively human figure. Her face was hidden behind a veil, and her silhouette was eerily similar to Song of the Fallen.

It was the Echo of Torment, whom Cassie had hidden in the Hollows in advance.

And Echoes had neither thoughts nor emotions… nothing for Jest to manipulate in order to turn them into his puppets.

His inhuman pupils moved.

Then, augmented by the power of the charm, the Transcendent Echo pushed Jest to his knees. And at the same time, Cassie rose from hers, wiping blood off her face.

Now that he was kneeling and she was standing, their eyes were on the same level.

Looking at Jest, Cassie smiled coldly.

"Did you… say that you were going to rip the head off my shoulders?"

Being strangled by the tentacles, Jest tried to smile.

"That… come on now, lass! That was just an innocent joke… a figure of speech, at best..."

She did not seem to find it funny, though. The cold smile disappeared from her face, replaced by something dark and ruthless.

Cassie took a deep breath.

"...Look me in the eyes and say it again, then."

At that moment, her eyes changed.

Looking at them, Jest reeled back, as if witnessing something that terrified him to the deepest, darkest corners of his bloodstained soul.

But it was already too late.

There was no escape.

Chapter-2145: Broken Door

As the goat-like abomination's expression grew slack, and its monstrously strong hands fell, Cassie took a deep breath.

She had to, because while Jest was caught in the boundless abyss of her eyes, the battle was not over.

What had to happen next would be a battle, too.

Cassie had broken the mental defenses of Master Orum with relative ease, but Jest was a Saint — one who was no stranger to mental manipulation, at that. So, she was going to have to work hard to extract what she wanted to learn from his memories.

But that was what it all had been about.

That was why she had risked being lured into the depths of the jungle by a sinister killer, endured the difficult fight, and allowed her body to be cut and bruised.

In truth, no matter how fearsome Saint Jest was, it wasn't that hard for her to get rid of him. If Cassie simply wanted to kill him, there were countless ways — the most difficult part about killing him was not the old man himself, really, but the reaction the King of Swords would have to his death.

They were away from the King's watchful gaze here, though…

And yet, Cassie's hands had still been tied. Because she wanted to keep Helie alive and needed to keep Jest alive. That was how she had ended up in a battle against two Saints whom she could not kill.

Of course, subduing someone was much harder than simply killing them. So, she was bruised and in pain, with blood soaking her garments beneath the battered armor.

Still, everything had transpired almost exactly according to her wishes. Saint Jest turned out to be even stronger than she had anticipated, but he had been doomed to lose from the moment he set his sights on Cassie.

It was ironic, really… among the servants of the Great Clan Valor, the old man seemed to be the only one who had seen through her pretense. He had sensed that the quiet, unassuming, and easily forgotten Lady Cassia was much more dangerous than everyone presumed.

And yet, he had still underestimated her.

It was as if her unassuming persona had managed to misguide him even after being seen through and uncovered as a false facade.

In all honesty, Cassie was quite amused by just how far simply being quiet, polite, and modest had gone in making people disregard her as a genuine threat.

Then again, perhaps it was simply the consequence of how hard it was to stand out when monsters like Changing Star and the Lord of Shadows were walking the world. There were Soul Reaper and the Prince of Nothing, too… there were brilliant talents like Morgan, Seishan, Beastmaster, Aether, Effie and Kai, all competing in the grandeur of their feats and accomplishments.

Because of them, people tended to forget that Cassie had survived the Forgotten Shore, too. She had been baptized by the madness of the Kingdom of Hope, too. She had fought in the Battle of the Black Skull, endured the horrors of the Nightmare Desert, and plunged into the deep dark waters of the Great River, too…

She was a monster, too.

It was just that she concealed her monstrous nature better than most, hiding it behind a pretty blindfold.

"Ah… what… what the hell…"

A few meters away, Helie groaned as she grasped her bleeding head. Now that Jest was caught in Cassie's bewitching gaze, his Aspect

powers were released, and she had regained her senses.

Turning, Helie looked at the scene in front of her dazedly. The hideous goat-like abomination was kneeling on the ground, looking into the eyes of the breathtakingly beautiful, delicate young woman who stood in front of him, her golden hair moving slightly in the wind.

Behind the kneeling creature… another delicate figure was hovering above the ground, with appalling tentacles stretching from beneath her elaborate red dress to bind him like moist black chains.

As Helie tried to comprehend what she was seeing, the red woman shifted and moved, carried through the air by her long tentacles. That movement was so eerie and inhuman that Helie shuddered.

She shuddered again and reeled back when the red woman came to hover above her, looking down from behind a veil.

Helie felt a strong impulse to crawl away.

"W—what…"

Before she could say anything else, one hand of the red woman rose. Moving with strange elegance, the eerie abomination reached toward its veil… and then, the creature pressed her index finger against where human lips would have been.

As if telling Helie to be quiet.

'...Echo. It's an Echo.'

Calming down, she threw another glance at Song of the Fallen and Jest, then grew silent. Whatever was happening there, Cassia seemed to have it under control… Helie herself, meanwhile, was bleeding profusely and had to tend to her wound.

Cassie could not allow herself to be distracted anymore.

Having invoked her Transformation — which only affected her eyes — she delved into the vast, hostile ocean of Saint Jest's memories.

He tried to resist her, making it much harder to discern what she was seeing and sensing, but Cassie pressed on, ruthlessly breaching his fearsome mental fortifications one after another.

Because her prey was so resilient, and because his life had been so long and storied, she was burning more essence than usual to maintain the Transformation. They were still in the Hollows, as well — even though there didn't seem to be any immediate threats nearby yet, that could change at any moment.

So, Cassie did not have the luxury of time to sift through Jest's memories slowly and thoroughly. Instead, she had to find the most important ones, the most intense ones… and, hopefully, discover a path to learning the secrets of the Sovereigns through them.

Inhaling deeply, she dove into the life of Jest of Dagonet, the hidden blade and executioner of the Great Clans.

***

"Damn. Shit… what is this crap? Really…"

Jest had come home.

His home, of course, was a concrete barrack where dozens of worker families had lived in pitiful living conditions, struggling to survive under the indifferent authority of the regime. Lives were short and deaths were frequent, so it was not surprising for familiar faces to disappear without a trace, replaced by new ones the next day.

Growing up, he had given up on remembering the names of the numerous Uncles and Aunties who flowed through the barrack, since it seemed like a futile endeavor.

Still…

Now, everyone was dead, which was a bit too much. The interior of the barrack was like a scene from hell, with countless half-devoured corpses littering the floor akin to a morbid carpet. The massacre seemed to have happened many days ago, so the blood had long dried. The smell, however, was overwhelming, making him retch.

"Ah… ah…"

Jest wanted to come inside to search for the remains of his family, but couldn't force himself to.

Instead, he took a few steps back, and somehow found himself sprawled on the ground.

His mind was empty, and there were tears streaming down his face.

'Turns out I still have tears to shed, huh?'

The thought was strangely calm and detached despite his miserable state.

Jest had not cried in a good decade or two. He was an adult now, after all, having turned twenty something not too long ago. He had finally escaped the barrack about a year ago. He had even harbored a vain hope of returning here one day with pockets full of credits, boasting about his accomplishments, and taking the others with him to live a better life someplace else.

Who knew that the world would end so soon?

Now, there were monsters roaming the streets, devouring people and tearing military tanks apart. The regime had collapsed, and he had nowhere to return to.

Jest had passed out when the end of the world started and experienced a long, dreadful nightmare. Waking up a few days later, somehow alive, he decided that there was no point in clinging to his silly dreams anymore and headed home… his real home, the barrack.

Crossing the city had proven to be a deadly ordeal, but he had survived somehow. In the process, he met a few others like him — people who had fallen into deep sleep and woke up wielding unexplainable powers.

But it was a joke. It was all like a vile, terrible joke.

Because his power was pure crap.

All he could do was make emotions stronger. Since the only emotion the monsters felt was a demented desire to rip him to pieces, the only thing Jest could do was make himself die faster.

'Maybe I should. Die faster, I mean…'

Looking at the broken door of the barrack, Jest suddenly felt a dark and oppressive sense of futility.

What was he struggling for, anyway?

The world was ending, and everyone was dead. Why was he clinging to life so desperately when being alive was so painful?

Looking down, he let out a stifled laugh.

"Ah. Ah! But... but..."

But wasn't it funny?

Despite the tears streaming from his eyes, he forced himself to smile.

There was a lesson that people from the barrack learned early on... life was unbearable if one was too serious.

Humans had to have a sense of humor to survive in this crappy world.

The world had turned even crappier now, so…

There was a funny joke in here, somewhere.

He just had to find it.

"I guess you guys don't have to kill yourself at work anymore."

'See?'

There was a bright side to anything.

Jest's tears tasted salty, but he forced himself to laugh.

Rising from the concrete, he decided to try and survive.

Not that it would be easy… nobody had a power as useless as his, after all, so he would undoubtedly die soon.

But he would at least die with a smile on his face while having fun.

…His forced smile still faltered, however, when he eventually entered the barrack and started searching the morbid carpet of corpses.

It took a long while before it returned.

Chapter-2146: Heart of the Party

"Ah. Finally, fresh air!"

Jest smiled as he looked at the forest where he was going to die. There was little doubt that his life was going to end shortly, gruesomely, and pathetically.

His lips trembled a little.

'No, really… this crap again?'

He had just barely managed to settle down in the actual world, finally finding a safe community that was defended from the monsters by a group of… what was it that people were calling them these days?

Right... Sleepers.

Jest was a Sleeper himself, so he had been welcomed there with open arms. Sadly, he was a defective Sleeper who could not wield Memories and did not have a useful power… he could still handle a rifle and a bayonet, but that alone did not win him a lot of points.

'Damn…'

And speaking of Memories! As it turned out, there were those, as well. Apparently, everyone received at least one in the Nightmare or shortly after. Jest had been clueless about the existence of Memories until he saw other Sleepers summoning deadly weapons out of thin air — it was then that he realized what his so-called Flaw meant.

Being unable to use "enchanted items" had not seemed like a big problem before he learned that enchanted items actually existed. But

knowing that they did, Jest could not deny the truth.

He was not just screwed… he was doubly screwed.

Other Sleepers had useful Aspects, and they could also wield Memories — the latter was often even more important than the former. Both allowed them to slay monsters, which he was unable to do.

And that, in turn, allowed them to collect the glimmering crystals from the monsters, absorb them, and grow stronger.

Sleepers needed strength to kill monsters, and they grew stronger by killing monsters… but Jest could not kill monsters because he was weak, and was weak because he could not kill monsters.

If that wasn't hilarious, he did not know what was.

In any case, he was not that useful to the community. People — even those who had not experienced the Nightmare — quickly started treating him with disdain. After all, he was being fed and protected without contributing much in return. The most he could do was handle various menial tasks inside the base… no different from a worker from the barrack, really.

Which was funny, as well.

Still, they had not kicked him out yet — because of his delightful personality and stellar sense of humor, no doubt. His life had been mostly safe and somewhat comfortable for the last couple of months.

Somewhat.

…Before the winter solstice.

On that cursed day, Jest had been relaxing on his bunk while carefully handling a precious antique — a real paper book that he had found in a museum while hiding there from the monsters.

That book was his lifeline, and despite its fragile state, Jest still poured over the yellow pages whenever he had free time. The festive title on the cover hinted that wisdom from before the Dark Times was

contained within…

Hold Your Bellies! A Hundred Hilarious Jokes to Make You the Heart of the Party!

That was what the ancient book was called.

Jest was just about to get to the nicest of the hundred irresistible jokes when he was suddenly overcome by a mighty yawn.

Which wasn't that strange…

If not for the fact that it was the middle of day.

His expression froze, and a trembling smile slowly bloomed on his face.

'No… no!'

The last time he had started yawning all of a sudden, he ended up in the Nightmare.

And here Jest was, mere hours later, in the alien world again.

Granted, this time felt different. The weird voice he sometimes heard in his head these days had welcomed him with new words, as well.

Plus, he was naked.

'What the hell is this…'

He had been clothed the last time, at least!

Shivering in the cold, Jest shielded his gaunt, bruised body from the wind and looked at the twisted trees that surrounded him with trepidation. There was nothing but these trees anywhere he looked, and sunlight barely pierced the thick canopy above…

There were almost no sounds here except for the ominous rustle of leaves and the sinister creaking of branches. The eerie silence was making him nervous.

Jest bit his lip and whispered:

"No weapons… no clothes… in the middle of the woods…"

After a while, he added in a trembling voice:

"Something something, naked guy… wood?"

A stifled laugh escaped from between his lips.

Picking up a rock from the ground, Jest shivered and started walking.

…It wasn't too long before he found another human.

A young man, not much different from him, was laying with his back against the tree… or so it seemed, at first. However, as Jest came closer, he was terrified to discover that the guy's body was actually embedded into the craggy trunk, as if being devoured by it. Crimson blood was flowing onto the dark bark, which drank it greedily.

A thick root was wrapped around the guy's waist, and thin branches were sprouting from his body, blooming with vermilion flowers.

The young man was already mostly dead… and yet, he was still alive and in pain.

Jest only realized that when their eyes met, and the other youth opened his mouth, straining to speak.

"Help… me…"

Jest reeled back.

He wanted nothing more than to turn around and run away, but something stopped him.

Perhaps it was compassion. Perhaps it was envy at the sight of the bloodied suit of leather armor that the young man was wearing.

In any case, Jest gritted his teeth.

"...Alright, buddy. Alright, I'll help you. Leave it to me."

Trembling, he took a step forward…

Then strained his muscles and brought down the sharp stone on the young man's head.

That was the only thing he could do for the poor fellow.

It took several blows before the light finally dimmed in the poor guy's eyes, and Jest staggered back in horror.

The leather armor he had wanted to steal disappeared into a rain of sparks.

And the roots of the tree moved, stretching in his direction.

Panicking, Jest turned around and ran…

And while he ran, the voice living in his head spoke once again.

[You have slain Dreamer…]

At the same time, Jest felt something strange.

It was as if something flowed into him, and responding to its presence, his body changed subtly.

Growing stronger, more agile, and harder to destroy.

His eyes glistened as he ran.

'So… there was another way to grow stronger, too.'

It was not just killing monsters.

Killing humans worked fine, as well.

He did not really know how to feel about that.

'...Ain't it the funniest thing, though?'

Chapter-2147: Fateful Meeting

Two days later, Jest emerged from the forest. He had expected to die… and yet, he was still alive, if just barely.

His body was covered in bruises and dried blood, and he was holding a makeshift spear in a trembling hand. The spear was made from a long branch, a sharp splinter of stone, and rope made from bark.

He was also wearing something akin to a poncho, made from beast hide and tied at the waist by another piece of rope. Of course, Jest had no idea whatsoever how to skin a beast, let alone how to treat leather or sew clothes… so, the poncho was quite disgusting to look at, and even more repugnant to smell.

He couldn't care less, though, since the entire damn forest was one terrifying living being, hellbent on consuming him whole.

"Damn… damn…"

Jest was running for his life. He had somehow managed to kill a beast, true, but there was more than one monster in this cursed land. Currently, one was pursuing him… and quite a terrifying one, at that.

He had been just running away blindly when the forest suddenly grew brighter, and then the trees disappeared altogether.

Instead… there was a river in front of him, flowing steadily as its surface glistened in the sun.

The sight of it was so beautiful and alien — where would anyone find a clean river surrounded by a forest in the real world? — that Jest froze for a moment, then shouted in anger.

The damn river!

Who cared if it was pretty?!

The only thing that mattered was that it stood in his way, and therefore, there was nowhere left for him to run.

Jest, of course, had no idea how to swim. Since there were no rivers, no lakes, and no ponds accessible for the workers of the regime — except for the toxic ones — he had never encountered a body of water larger than a bathtub.

Even then, a bathtub was a luxury that people like him rarely saw. Most were only familiar with communal showers.

"Damn!"

Groaning, Jest grasped his pathetic spear and forced his tired body to move. He ran along the bank of the river, forcing air into his burning lungs.

But it was all futile.

He could already hear a terrifying growling coming from behind him, and the sound of something heavy moving through the grass.

'Not… not… not like this! There's no punchline, damn it!'

His life had been a joke, but if he was going to die, he at least hoped that it would be a good one.

Jest considered turning around and trying to fight, but at that moment, he tripped and fell into the dirt, rolling a few times before coming to a halt, sprawled in the dirt.

His sorry excuse of a spear had broken. The sturdy branch was intact, but the binding of the spearhead had come undone, and the sharp piece of rock flew away.

There were bitter tears in his eyes, and through them…

He saw a terrible, blurry beast lunging at him with hungry madness burning in its eyes.

Death was coming.

Just then, though, a shadow momentarily covered Jest's face, and a steel javelin suddenly plummeted from the sky, piercing the beast's forehead and impaling it. The massive creature's jaw hit the ground, and it crumbled, rolling over its head and crashing heavily mere centimeters away from Jest.

He stared at the dead beast silently, then studied the javelin.

Then, after a while, he looked up.

There was someone standing above him, having appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

It was a tall young man with handsome features, dark hair, and steely grey eyes. His face was perfectly clean, and he was wearing a polished suit of knightly armor that seemed as impenetrable as a tank.

In other words, he was the perfect opposite of the dirty, gaunt, and barely clothed Jest.

The young knight looked down and gave him a charismatic smile.

"You were smart not to jump into the river to escape the beast, friend."

Jest blinked a couple of times.

Then, he said weakly:

"River. I… I h—hardly knew her?"

The knightly young man looked at him strangely, giving Jest the impression that he had no sense of humor.

Well, no one was perfect.

His savior, meanwhile, offered him a hand.

"What I meant was that there are even worse kinds of creatures under

the water."

Jest accepted the offered hand and slowly stood up.

It was then that it struck him…

The valiant stranger was speaking in the language of the real world.

Not in the strange and archaic language that the people in the Nightmare had spoken, yet Jest could still somehow understand.

Come to think of it, the poor guy whom Jest helped avoid being digested alive by a tree had spoken in the real language, as well.

Jest stared at the young man with wide eyes.

"Wait… are you real?"

The young knight nodded.

"Quite real, yes. It seems that this situation is different from the Nightmare. Actually, there is an entire group of Sleepers here, in this monstrous forest. We were all sent here together."

He remained silent for a moment, then smiled.

"All people of great courage and valor, no doubt."

Jest stared at him with wide eyes.

"...Valor? Who cares about valor?! Do you have food and water? That is what I want to know?"

The young knight laughed.

"Yes, we do."

Then, he stepped on the head of the dead monster to pull his javelin out.

"We should harvest the soul shard and leave this place as quickly as possible, though… otherwise, our own valor will be tested when more monsters arrive at the smell of blood. I have little of it, so we'd

better not linger."

Jest remained silent, trying to come up with a suitable joke.

For some reason, he really wanted to mock the unbearably serious young knight.

Who knew that their chance encounter would set the course of his entire life?

Because the young knight, despite claiming not to be too valiant, was destined to become Warden of Valor.

While Jest… was destined to become his sharpest blade.

Chapter-2148: The Knight and the Fool

"You are completely crazy. Insane. Psycho. A raving lunatic… a madman!"

Jest was muttering curses as he stood on the shore of a beautiful lake, while the young knight just listened nonchalantly. Behind them, a few dozen bloodied, terrified Sleepers were busy toppling the trees.

The young knight was still clean and handsome, even if his polished armor had a dozen dents by now. He had fought and killed more monsters than anyone else, but still managed to look valiant and unperturbed despite that.

The past few days had not been kind to them.

Initially, there had indeed been a large group of Sleepers who banded together after finding themselves in the dreadful forest — almost a hundred of them, with new survivors joining every day. A considerable force even during the end of times… or so they had thought.

The Sleepers had established a camp on the shore of the river — far enough from the trees to have time to react when the forest monsters attacked, but also far enough from the water to defend themselves against the aquatic abominations. They worked together to survive, unsure where they were and what the future held.

However, Jest had become a pariah once again… and that was despite his positive attitude and disarming sense of humor. Strength was the only virtue in the world that had gone insane, and he had none.

Worse than that, he reeked. Everyone seemed to have some kind of

Memory, be it armor or enchanted garments, to cover themselves… but he only had his crudely made poncho. So, people tended to avoid him.

Because of the smell. Not because of the jokes, of course.

Everyone except for the infuriating knight, that was.

Jest had even asked him about it.

"Listen, dimples… how come you keep bothering me? My Aspect is useless, you know. I also don't have any Memories."

But the knight only chuckled.

"Exactly."

He glanced at the rest of the Sleepers.

"Everyone here has fought hard to survive. During the Nightmare, after the Nightmare, and here as well… while having powerful Aspects and deadly Memories. But wouldn't a person who has neither have fought the hardest?"

The knight shook his head.

"Don't take me for a fool. I am not talking to you because I am gracious and kind. I am talking to you because I think you are strong, and I need strong comrades to survive."

Jest shook his head in amazement.

"Wow. Who would have thought? There's actually brains in that handsome head..."

The young knight raised an eyebrow.

"Thank you? But also, was that ever in doubt?"

Jest shrugged.

"Ah, don't take it personally! It's just that you are so calm and upbeat all the time that I thought there's a screw or two… or a dozen… loose

in your head."

The knight looked at him strangely, then shook his head in amusement.

"No, but… of all people…"

Jest did not quite catch the meaning.

In any case, that was how they ended up as comrades.

By now, Jest wasn't wearing a filthy poncho anymore. The knight had a strange Aspect that allowed him to craft all kinds of things, so he had fashioned a set of clothes for Jest, as well as a proper wooden spear, a bow, and a quiver of arrows.

Being able to summon magical flames or possessing tremendous strength seemed like the kind of Aspects people would want to have, but that ability to craft things had actually earned the young knight more respect and reputation than his armor, his sword, and his uncanny ability to kill monsters.

Although Sleepers possessed Memories, few had many of them. So, everyone needed something to make up for the equipment they had left in the real world.

That was how the knight had become one of the leaders of the group, and Jest was catapulted to the very height of social hierarchy as his friend.

Holding onto a golden thigh was a pleasant way to live.

Not that everything went well for him and the other Sleepers.

The forest was immeasurably dangerous, and the river was as well. Many of them had died while fighting the monsters…

But actually, the humans were just as dangerous themselves.

The same thing that was happening in the real world continued to happen here. Out there… people were scared, traumatized, hopeless, and unable to recognize the world that had changed in an instant.

Naturally, many strange ideas were sprouting from the rich soil of fear and despair.

There were cruel warlords, roving gangs of marauders who had lost all remains of humanity, broken fragments of local governments that were slowly descending into appalling lunacies, and weird cults that were perhaps the most sinister, eerie, and harmful of them all.

Here as well… not all of the Sleepers were quite sane, and even less were entirely benevolent.

So, eventually, there was a bit of bloodshed, and the group broke apart.

Most of them had decided to try their luck by following the river downstream, while the knight and his followers decided to travel upstream, instead.

Toward the lake…

And an enormous castle that towered above it like a beautiful mirage, there in the distance.

The young knight was currently standing on the shore of the lake, armed with a sword and a shield. He looked quite valiant in his knightly armor, but Jest was in no mood to appreciate the heroic ambience.

Because the rest of the men and women in their group were toppling trees to build rafts.

"Listen, you… you know that there are dreadful abominations living in the lake, right?"

The knight nodded.

"Right."

Jest took a deep breath.

"And although we don't know what exactly lives in the castle, we all saw the dragon breathing fire from the roof of the main keep. Right?"

Their intrepid leader nodded again.

"That thing did look like a dragon, true."

Jest exhaled through gritted teeth.

"So why are we going to the castle?! Even the crazy fools who went downstream agreed that going to the castle is suicide!"

The young knight looked at him with a smile.

"You know, I always wanted to kill a dragon."

Jest blinked.

"...Really?"

The knight laughed.

"Heavens, no! Despite what you think, I'm not crazy. Who in their right mind wants to fight a dragon? An actual dragon. Those things are unscientific, they aren't even supposed to exist… weren't supposed to exist, at least."

Jest shook his head in bewilderment.

"So why then?"

The young knight remained silent for a while.

Then, he looked at the castle again, his expression finally turning somber.

"Because I left my pregnant wife alone in the real world. There was a way back the last time… so, there has to be a way back this time, as well. The castle is the only man-made structure we've seen so far. Plus, it's rather conspicuous. So, I am going to conquer it and return home, even if I have to kill a dragon."

Jest stared at him with a mix of envy and admiration for a few moments.

It had to be nice… to still have a home, and someone waiting for you

to return there.

Eventually, he sighed deeply.

"Well, alright. Let's kill a dragon."

The young knight glanced at him.

"What, no joke this time?"

Jest gritted his teeth.

"Bastard! This entire situation is a joke! Is this not fun enough for you?!"

The knight looked away with a wistful expression.

"To be honest, I don't really have a sense of humor. I've never been good at having fun. So, Jest… I'll delegate that part to you."

Just stared at him with wide eyes.

Huh?

'I didn't volunteer, though? What am I, a clown? No, but what is this bastard even saying?!'

The next morning, they sailed across the lake toward the castle.

Chapter-2149: Red Dragon

The lake had turned out to be utterly deadly. Even after preparing thoroughly for the battle against the terrifying creatures that dwelled in it, the Sleepers led by the young knight still ended up losing one of the rafts — they managed to pull a couple of people out of the water, but the rest were pulled into the depths, never to be seen again.

The clear water was painted red with blood.

The rest of the rafts only survived because they were crafted from the unnaturally sturdy wood of the cursed forest with the help of their leader's Aspect. Otherwise, there would have been only drifting splinters left on the surface, with all traces of the Sleepers washed away by the clear water.

Even then, the journey had not been easy for those who survived. By the time they reached the walls of the castle, each and every one of the Sleepers was bloodied, barely conscious because of exhaustion, and numb from terror.

Except for the knight, of course. He was bloodied and tired, too… but his calm confidence had never waned.

By then, Jest was starting to suspect that his new buddy was the craziest one of them all.

Or maybe simply the most driven.

The castle, meanwhile, was huge. It was many times larger than they had assumed, to the point that one would feel vertigo when trying to look up the immense expanse of the towering ramparts. There was more than one layer of walls, as well, rising in concentric circles up the slope of the mountain.

The castle was like a city in and of itself.

The Sleepers were currently at the lowest point of that stone city, while the main keep was at the highest, built upon the very peak.

That was where the dragon had made its nest.

The dragon wasn't the only monster inhabiting the gargantuan fortress, either.

They learned it immediately after approaching the towering gateway. For the next few days, the Sleepers had slowly made progress toward the main keep, enduring one harrowing battle after another. The monsters they faced were different from the ones of the forest — not all of them were beasts, some wearing armor and wielding steel weapons with chilling skill.

And the higher they climbed, the more powerful the monsters became. Still, the young knight led them from one structure to another, from one bastion to the next, carving a path to the main keep. They fought when there was no other choice and hid when they could, bandaging their wounds and absorbing the power from the soul shards they had scavenged.

It was quite amazing, really. Jest would have never expected that they would get that far… but the disorganized group of Sleepers had somehow turned into a stalwart and cohesive combat force somewhere along the way. They all moved with purposeful determination, acting as one enormous being that possessed a hundred eyes and a hundred hands, its resilient body brimming with sharp weapons.

Was it experience? Was it survival instinct? Was it the benefit of having a daring and indomitable leader? He did not know, but whatever it was, it seemed to be working.

Except for the times when the moon was high in the night sky.

There was always something eerie about the ancient castle, but its chilling, mysterious presence grew so much more sinister and palpable in the moonlight. That was why even the young knight did not dare to leave their shelters when the moon was shining upon the beautiful lake.

…Just like that, they fought and sneaked their way to the last and highest circle of walls. Beyond them, only the main keep remained.

Everyone was tired. No one knew what would happen to them, and everyone felt grim about the future.

But, strangely enough, they also felt hopeful.

They remained in one of the towers of the last rampart for a few days, observing the main keep and gathering strength… and courage… for the last push.

In the morning, the young knight and Jest snuck to the top of the wall to take a peek at the keep.

The great winged beast was sleeping on its roof, its vermilion scales glistening in the light of the rising sun. Thin plumes of smoke rose from its maw from time to time, only to be scattered by the wind moments later. Despite the distance separating them from the dragon, they could feel the deep reverberations of its steady breaths.

The creature spent most of the time asleep, only waking up once every week or so to fly over the lake and burn the forest. No one knew why it was doing that, and it almost seemed as if the dragon was simply unleashing its accumulated fury.

It would fly above the forest for a while, roaring in anger and sending great jets of incinerating flame barreling down. After a while, when large swaths of the forest became shrouded by acrid smoke, it would plummet into the billowing black veil of it and disappear from view.

Some time later, the dragon would return, sometimes carrying the charred carcasses of enormous, abominable beasts in its maw.

The sight of it was both majestic and terrifying. The scales of the red dragon had a metallic sheen to them, almost making it seem like the great beast was forged from vermilion steel. Surrounded by black smoke, the dragon was like a herald of hell, bringing hellfire wherever it went.

And that…

That was the thing their leader wanted to kill.

Jest glanced at the young knight darkly.

"...What are you thinking about in that handsome head of yours?"

The knight's steely grey eyes were focused on the sleeping dragon.

After a while, he spoke:

"We watched the beast fly over the lake yesterday, did we not? And seven days before that, when we were preparing the rafts."

Jest nodded.

"What of it?"

The knight remained silent for a while.

"Have you noticed, Jest? When the dragon was flying across the lake, there was something missing. I wondered what it was for the longest time."

Jest frowned.

"Your sanity is missing. What else is new?"

The knight smiled, then leaned his back on the wall and raised his sword carefully, extending its blade beyond the entrance of the tower. Jest could see the keep reflecting in its polished blade.

"Do you see it now?"

Jest blinked.

'Huh.'

Something was indeed missing.

Chapter-2150: A Place to Call Home

He hesitated for a few moments.

The sword was not exactly a mirror, and its blade wasn't truly flat either. So, the reflection was somewhat distorted — and yet, he could discern the shapes of things.

There was the parapet of the rampart, the beautiful edifice of the main keep, its roof and towers, tattered flags hanging limp in the absence of wind. There was also the lilac sky behind the keep, and the clouds drifting in its vast expanse like pieces of a torn shroud.

However, there was one thing missing.

The great mass of the sleeping dragon was not reflected in the sword.

Jest rubbed his eyes, then carefully leaned through the doorway to look at the roof of the main keep with his own two eyes.

The damn dragon was there, sleeping soundly. It was hard not to notice its vivid vermilion silhouette contoured against white stone.

'What the hell?'

He retreated back into the tower.

"Where's the damn dragon?"

The young knight nodded.

"Indeed. I noticed it yesterday… the dragon did not reflect in the lake while flying over it. Strange, isn't it?"

Jest rubbed the back of his head, then shrugged.

"Well, yeah. It is strange. But what does it mean?"

The knight smiled.

"Who knows? I do have a theory, though."

His smile dimmed slowly, replaced by a serious expression.

"You see, Jest… I don't think that this dragon is even real."

He paused for a moment, then added in a wondering tone:

"Maybe it's an illusion… or a phantom. Maybe it's merely a lingering reflection, and the real dragon is long gone…"

Cassie was quite curious to see how Warden of Valor and his first group of followers had conquered Bastion, and what they found inside. After all, it was not just a Citadel left behind by one of the daemons… somewhere along the way, the young knight had also discovered a Lineage Memory and inherited the bloodline of War God.

Perhaps he had received that Memory for slaying the reflection of the vermilion dragon, even, or discovered it in the throne room of Bastion…

But no matter how curious she was, she could not allow herself to get distracted — she had already spent too much time exploring the dawn of the Nightmare Spell era. Jest was resisting her Aspect fiercely, and her essence was draining at appalling speed.

In fact…

Even though the old man was supposed to be completely mesmerized by her gaze, she suddenly sensed one of his fingers twitching, almost as if the abomination was struggling to regain control over its hands.

So, Cassie had to abandon the vivid memory and reach for the next one, hoping that it would bring her closer to the secrets of the Sovereigns.

She saw…

Jest was an Awakened now. His gaunt figure had turned lean and strong, and his gaze was more confident. That said… he had only been an Awakened for a few weeks.

He was standing on the wall, armed with an actual steel spear — something he had picked up from one of the abominations they had slain on the way to the main keep.

Hardship had not ended after the dying dragon fell into the lake. They had found the Gateway and were able to wake up, true, growing vastly more powerful in the process… but the castle was still teeming with monsters, and so was the lake. Their damned leader was not satisfied with simply hiding in the keep, either, and insisted on organizing rescue parties to search for more Sleepers in the forest.

That was just how that guy was, and people tended to follow his example.

So, Jest was forced to fight for survival when he was awake, and then fight even more when he slept. Life was miserable.

At least his Awakened Ability was not as useless as his Dormant one — as long as he had a partner to make use of it. Being professional bait… what a fate!

Jest scoffed.

Just as he did, there was the sound of footsteps, and a familiar figure appeared on the wall beside him. The polished armor was the same, but now, the knightly young man was wearing a vermilion cloak — a Memory he had received after slaying the illusion of the dragon.

He was smiling.

Jest sighed and shook his head.

"Hey there… what are we supposed to call you again? Warden?"

The young knight chuckled.

"Don't be jealous, Jest… I'm sure you'll earn a cool True Name too, one day soon."

'Oh, don't doubt it!'

Warden of Valor was really too cheesy of a name, anyway. Jest would surely receive one that was ten times more impressive.

He hesitated for a while, then asked:

"So, how is your wife? Everything is fine, I hope?"

Warden nodded happily.

"It's a healthy baby boy. We named him Madoc. Oh…"

He looked at Jest with interest.

"But don't I need to congratulate you, too? Honestly, it's unbelievable. A guy like you… with a girl like that… everyone is stunned!"

Jest suddenly coughed.

"Well, that… it's not like I'm holding her hostage, okay? She was just impressed when I pulled her out of the flames, back when we were fighting that damn lizard. And, well, you know what they say. The best way to get a girl is to make her laugh!"

Warden nodded thoughtfully.

"Exactly, so how did you get her?"

Jest frowned.

"Go to hell, bastard."

The young knight smiled.

"When are you planning to make it official? My son will need playmates, you know…"

Jest coughed again.

"Listen, it's not like I don't want to. But we are in different cities in the real world. You and I ended up in NQSC, but she's from up north."

It was already lucky that the two of them were in the same Quadrant.

After explaining the logistical problems Awakened couples faced, Jest sighed.

"I'm thinking of going to get her soon."

Warden's expression was somber, though.

Jest frowned.

"What?"

His friend and benefactor shook his head.

"No, it's just that… I heard bad things about that city."

Jest raised an eyebrow.

"Oh?"

Warden hesitated for a while, then leaned on the parapet of the rampart. His expression changed subtly, losing its usual veneer of confidence. Instead, what Jest saw was… weariness. And fear.

"People… people can be as terrible as monsters, you know."

Jest laughed.

Did he know it?

There were very few people in the world who knew it better than him.

"That is where you are wrong, Warden. People are not as terrible as monsters… people are monsters. Some of them, at least."

He remained silent for a few moments, and then added in a cold tone:

"But haven't we gotten pretty good at killing monsters, though?"

Chapter-2151: Obvious Solution

Warden remained silent for a while, looking at the sprawling expanse of the castle, the beautiful lake beyond, and the dark palisade of twisted trees in the distance.

The castle was still teeming with abominations, the depths of the lake hid horrors beyond description, and the forest itself was one enormous, slumbering monster… now that the vermilion dragon was gone, there was nothing left to keep that monster in check, and it would probably come to life soon.

And yet, Jest had never seen the young knight, Warden of Valor, look troubled while braving the perils of this nightmarish land.

He looked quite troubled now, though, while thinking about the real world.

Eventually, Warden sighed.

"Now that I have a son, I can't help but think about the future. Both the distant future and the immediate future… all I can see ahead is trouble."

Jest raised his eyebrows and chuckled.

"Check your eyesight, maybe?"

Warden shook his head.

"The distant future is too hard to predict, because the nature of how we live our lives has fundamentally changed. I am not talking about the Nightmare Spell and the Nightmare Creatures — I am talking about ourselves. About humans. Human lives have always been shaped by those in power, and therefore, established power structures had remained more or less the same for thousands of years.

But now, all those structures have become meaningless."

The young knight raised a hand and made a fist.

"That is because there seems to be no limit to personal power anymore. We were mundane people not too long ago, but now we are Awakened who possess superhuman strength and mystical abilities. It is reasonable to assume that there are higher rungs on this ladder — there are Fallen monsters, after all, and Ascended Memories. So, someone will find a way to grow even more powerful sooner or later, and then even more powerful after that."

He paused for a moment and looked at Jest somberly.

"The framework of humanity is built upon the principle that an individual can't defeat an army, though. It's the fundamental principle… remove it, and the whole structure will collapse. We, Awakened, are already so tough that killing us with conventional weapons is a tall task. What about Ascended? What about those who will one day transcend even that theoretical frontier?"

Warden shook his head with a wary expression on his face.

"The nature of power itself will change. So, the shape of our lives will be changed, as well… for better or worse."

Jest blinked a few times and stared at the young knight for a few moments. Then, he raised a hand and pointed an accusing finger at him.

"You're… you're from a rich family, aren't you?! Damn! That explains so much!"

Warden tilted his head in confusion.

"That… is not a reaction I expected."

Jest let out a laugh.

"Listen, all these profound contemplations of yours are a dead giveaway. Only spoiled brats from bureaucrat families have enough time to waste it on learning fancy words and studying philosophy.

The rest of us are too busy making a living, and a miserable one at that!"

Warden blinked.

"That's not philosophy, though? That's mainly history and a bit of sociology. A smidgen of anthropology, at best."

Jest pointed again.

"See! Fancy words!"

The young knight coughed and looked away with a hint of embarrassment.

"...My parents were engineers, to be precise. Not bureaucrats."

Jest grinned.

Military engineers were also elites. And although Warden did not say that his parents had belonged to the army, there was no doubt that they had — after all, everyone worth anything used to be conscripted, back when the regime still existed.

Before the Nightmare Spell.

"Anyway, that's what you are afraid of? That your son will grow up in a world ruled by a handful of tyrants who can annihilate armies single-handedly?"

Warden grimaced.

"It's a gross oversimplification, but basically… yes."

Jest laughed.

"What's the problem, then? Isn't there an obvious solution?"

The young knight raised an eyebrow.

"There is?"

Jest nodded, then shrugged with a confused expression.

"Well, of course. You just have to make sure to become one of those omnipotent tyrants yourself."

He himself would undoubtedly die an untimely death by harboring such ambitions… but if it was Warden, then it could actually be possible. If anyone was capable of gaining great power in this dreadful new world, then it was their intrepid leader. After all, the guy was already ostensibly ruling the castle and had a large group of powerful Awakened following him.

Warden studied Jest for a few moments, then smiled strangely.

"Become one of the rulers myself? Well. Maybe you are right. Maybe it is that simple."

His smile slowly turned wistful.

"But that only concerns the distant future. The immediate future is much more troubling, really."

Jest simply stared at him sullenly.

"What are you so worried about? We'll gain full control of the castle within a year. We'll have a safe space to spend the nights and enough food to fill our bellies. We are also Awakened now, so surviving in the real world has become much easier… even though the monsters are also growing stronger, it seems. So what has gotten you so worried?"

Warden remained silent for a while, then frowned.

"It actually has to do with our previous conversation. People… I am worried about people."

His expression darkened.

"Now that every remaining government and coalition in the world have collapsed, there is little order left anywhere anymore. People are just banding together to survive… naturally, they can't survive without the Awakened. Only Awakaned can effectively battle the monsters, so they have great value. There are remnants of previous authorities employing Awakened to fight for them, but they won't be

able to control their own soldiers for long. In the end, the power will concentrate in the hands of people like us — and not everyone will use it fairly."

Jest scowled.

"So what? What does it have to do with us? You're not feeling responsible for the whole world, are you? Because, let me tell you something, Mr. Warden… you're not a god. Despite those magical powers of yours, you're still a person."

Warden sighed.

After a few moments of silence, he said:

"I am a part of the world too, am I not? Indeed, I am a person. My wife and son are people, too. People need food, shelter, and clean drinking water. They need air to breathe. You know how fractured NQSC is at the moment… there are so many factions and smaller communities that I can't even count them all. It has been less than a year since the Nightmare Spell descended, so things are still somewhat stable. But…"

He frowned.

"Who is going to repair the city barriers when they break down? Who is going to maintain the hydroponic farms? Who is going to distribute the food and make sure that people don't starve? For now, the infrastructure of the city is being controlled by a few factions that splintered from the regime when it broke apart. A few key points are being held hostage by Awakened warlords. Things are only going to get worse in the future, and that is just NQSC. It is in a far better state than the other cities."

Jest smiled.

"Aren't you overlooking something, though? Indeed, we are Awakened! You personally have the power to craft incredible items. There are others with the power to make plants grow faster, or summon stuff from thin air. The city barriers and farms have been maintained by the regime, but now that there are people like us

walking around, making miracles happen… who's to say that things aren't going to improve, instead?"

His smile widened.

"Maybe your son will live ten times better than we ever did. My life has already improved, in fact. I have an entire room of my own… it even has an attached bathroom! And I haven't been hungry in weeks. That is also what the future holds, too."

Jest sighed.

"Now, if only I could fetch my girlfriend from that pit up north… life would be perfect."

Warden looked at him silently for a while, thinking about something.

Eventually, he shook his head.

"No way, have you been an optimist this whole time?"

Jest scratched the back of his head.

"Have my sunny personality and amazing sense of humor not relayed that? Anyway, I do understand your concerns. There are crazy people everywhere, and many of them have Awakened, as well. There are already horror stories being told about the guy who controls the train tracks. The factions formed by the former members of the secret police is… very creepy, too. And those fanatics going around trying to convert people, they're the creepiest! Honestly, what we need to do is gather the guys that reside in the castle out there in the real world, as well, and form a faction of our own. Better safe than sorry."

Warden remained silent for a while, then smiled.

"...You're just saying that because you want my help in retrieving your girlfriend, right?"

Jest grinned.

"She's from the castle too, is she not? More than that, her Aspect is quite useful… unlike mine. If you want to become one of the

omnipotent tyrants of the distant future, you'll need people like her."

Warden lingered for a while.

Eventually, he shrugged.

"Well, why not? Let's gather a team of reliable people and go on a trip to the north. We can invite more of our fellow Awakened who reside there to join us in NQSC, as well. I'm not sure what shape the future will take, but if we want to even have a say in what happens to us, we need to consolidate our powerbase first… building a reliable foundation is the most important step, after all. And if we want to build a bastion of safety for us and our families, we will need a truly robust foundation."

Jest grinned, prompting Warden to look at him with suspicion.

"...What?"

Jest shook his head.

"No, no… it's nothing. It's just that, speaking of robust foundations… uh… wait, I almost have it!"

There was definitely a joke in there!

Warden took a deep breath and turned away.

"Right. I'll be going then… let's meet in the real world, when we wake up."

The goal of their trip to the north was quite simple — to gather a few of the Awakened following Warden from there and bring them all to NQSC.

However, many things changed as a result of that journey, and both of them were changed, as well.

Chapter-2152: Esteemed Temporary Governor

A month later, a weary group of Awakened stood on a hill in the desolate wasteland, looking at the sprawling ruins below. The world seemed entirely black and white, with charred frames of ancient buildings rising from the snow. Cold wind was trying to get into the gaps of their armor, and neither the warm coats nor the mittens they wore on top of the gloves could stop it.

This land seemed dead, with no trace of life left anywhere on its poisoned surface.

Of course… it was not the Dream Realm. Instead, it was the real world. The charred ruins were simply one of the countless human cities that had been destroyed during the Dark Times, and the soil was contaminated by dreadful weapons borne of human mind, not some eerie curse.

The air was toxic, as well, which was why they were wearing military gas masks and carrying oxygen tanks on their backs — Awakened were more tenacious than mundane people, but braving the wild reaches of Earth unprotected was still a deadly task for them.

The long journey had been a rough experience even for Warden and his people. There were very few Nightmare Creatures out here, but the land itself presented an obstacle. With the collapse of the regime, as well as other powers that had ruled the remaining human enclaves in this part of the world, whatever logistics and transportation systems that had existed before were now in complete disarray.

Warden and his warriors had intended to travel by train, but the tracks were broken just a few hundred kilometers away from NQSC. So, they purchased an off-road cargo vehicle from a group of former soldiers and drove it further north.

The vehicle had not been very comfortable, but at least it worked. Sadly, its engine was torn to shreds by the claws of a random Nightmare Creature about a week ago, and they had to cover the rest of the distance on foot.

…Overall, Jest couldn't quite decide which of the worlds was more inhospitable. He did enjoy returning to the castle when it was his turn to sleep, though — it was warm there, at least.

In any case, they had reached their destination now.

There was a human settlement in front of them.

It was much smaller than NQSC, of course, with a population that barely reached a few dozen millions of people. More than that, it had not been turned into a fearsome siege capital during the Dark Times, so its defenses and infrastructure were far inferior.

There were no tall barriers surrounding the city like an impenetrable ring, serving both as defensive fortifications and a sophisticated air filtration system. Instead, there were several domed areas hidden deep within the charred ruins — the original city had been much more sprawling than the one that emerged from its corpse, despite having housed far fewer people.

Pulling his gas mask up, Warden inhaled the cold air, grimaced, and then put it back on.

"Let's get inside as quickly as we can. Be careful — there will be many abominations in the ruins. Jest, get the map."

Since several of the Awakened in the castle were from this forlorn city, they had given them a lot of information about the situation inside.

The situation… was not good. After the descent of the Nightmare Spell, the domed areas became largely isolated from each other, and each was now in the hands of its own self-proclaimed ruler. Some of those rulers were good, some were bad, and some were worse.

So, Warden added:

"Be even more careful when we encounter people. There are thousands of Awakened in the city, and even if we are more powerful and better prepared, we can't fight them all."

The others nodded somberly.

Soon, they descended from the hill and entered the ruins.

They had to battle a few Nightmare Creatures, and even an entire swarm of terrible beasts, on the way to the nearest dome. However, Warden's followers were all experienced and deadly warriors by now. They carved a path through the ruins without losing a single man, and eventually found themselves among humans once more.

Life in the dome they entered seemed… strangely more orderly than what had been happening in NQSC in the last year.

Everyone moved with purpose and determination, busy at work. Granted, people seemed tired and malnourished, most of them wearing bleak expressions — however, no one cowered in fear of Nightmare Creatures, since there were teams of Awakened constantly patrolling the streets.

Warden looked around with a guarded, but subtly surprised expression.

They were met by an Awakened officer of the local garrison and treated in a friendly manner. He was quite happy to meet them, it seemed — a group of powerful Awakened warriors was most welcome to enter the city, since their strength could only help the situation.

"All of us Awakened are comrades. We were called upon to carry out a solemn duty."

Warden and Jest glanced at each other, feeling a little troubled.

After arranging their accommodations, the officer escorted them to a dinner with the person ruling the dome, who seemed to be called the Esteemed Temporary Governor.

The dinner was nothing short of lavish, and the Governor — an

Awakened with clean features and a dashing smile — was both polite and friendly. He inquired about the situation in NQSC with curiosity, explaining how things were handled here in comparison.

At some point, an old man in a servant livery arrived to pour more wine into their glasses. Jest was so amazed at the strange opulence of the Governor's residence that when the servant's hand trembled, and a few drops of wine fell on the white tablecloth, he did not even notice.

But the gracious host of the dinner did.

The old man shuddered.

The Governor looked at him with a smile, then shifted his gaze to one of the Awakened warriors guarding the room and waved a hand slightly.

Before anyone could react, the guard forcefully grabbed the old man and dragged him out of the room.

The Governor sighed apologetically.

"Please forgive the unsightly display, Lord Warden. You know how it is… it's difficult to train cattle, is it not?"

Chapter-2153: A Cleaner World

After the dinner with the Esteemed Temporary Governor, the dome did not seem orderly and neat to Jest anymore.

Instead, it looked morbid and revolting.

Back there in the opulent room, the amicable tyrant had eagerly explained his unhinged views to the members of Warden's team… rather, he had complained about his hardships to fellow Awakened, not even bothering to check if they shared his delusion.

As if it was a matter of course.

What the Esteemed Temporary Governor believed… in short, it was that only Awakened were real people, and therefore deserved to be treated as such.

With the descent of the Nightmare Spell, humanity was separated into two distinct groups — those who had been chosen by the Spell, and those whom it ignored.

The first group was stronger, faster, and more resilient. Awakened possessed mystical powers, and were given deadly trials to prove their worth. Naturally, it was only to be expected that they would play a greater role in society going forward, and would earn greater privileges as a result.

However, the damn maniac had taken it to a whole other level. He seemed to consider being chosen by the Spell as the will of Heaven, anointing the Awakened as true inheritors of Earth.

Awakened were holy… and therefore, those not chosen by the Spell were wicked. They were mere beasts who walked through their lives asleep, unable to feel real emotions or have rational thoughts, clumsily imitating human behavior. It was only right to treat them as

cattle — or dispose of them if they outlived their use.

At least that was what the Governor believed. It was unclear if his soldiers shared in this demented belief or simply followed his whims because their abuse of the mundane population went unpunished under his rule.

There was indeed order and safety… but it was not because people were united in the task of maintaining the dome. Instead, it was because people were treated as slaves, and anyone who failed to accomplish the tasks given to them by the Awakened were cruelly punished, or outright killed.

Warden's expression was stiff as they walked to their accommodations.

Eventually, he said:

"I… knew it was going to be bad. But I didn't think that it would get this bad, this fast."

Jest looked at him.

"Who's the optimist now, huh?"

Warden just stared back blankly.

Jest sighed.

"Well, it doesn't matter. None of our people are in this dome, anyway — we'll need to cross over to other domes if we want to get to them."

It was not that surprising, really. The Governor did take his views way too far, but he was definitely not the only member of the nascent Awakened supremacy movement. It was only natural that there would be some who saw Awakened as inherently different and innately superior beings when compared to ordinary humans.

It was also not that rare to see people get all kinds of weird ideas about the Nightmare Spell, seeing it as some kind of divine intervention. There were at least a dozen odd cults spreading in NQSC, growing in numbers and developing extremist tendencies at a

rapid pace.

And that was just what crazy people did. There were also those who were quite sane, but callously exploited the lunacy of others with malicious intent.

It was a proper mess.

Warden's expression darkened, but he did not say anything else.

…For a while.

In the morning, after they had witnessed more of how atrociously mundane people were treated inside the dome, Warden called out for Jest quietly.

To be fair, by then, even Jest himself was a little pale. He had even left his breakfast untouched, feeling sick to his stomach at the sight of the lavish meal.

That was probably the first time Jest had neglected free food.

Warden looked at him for a while, then said evenly:

"About what you said. That we should just move on to the next dome."

Jest raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah?"

Warden lingered for a moment.

"What if I don't want to?"

He frowned, then added slowly:

"What if I want to start working on that… obvious solution… right now? Won't I need to eliminate competition if I want to become one of the eventual rulers of humanity?"

Jest smiled.

It seemed to him like the order was reversed… what Warden really wanted was for the trash like the Esteemed Temporary Governor to be eliminated, and since no one else was cleaning the streets, he had no choice but to become the garbage disposal specialist himself.

So that his son could grow up in a cleaner world.

Jest shrugged.

"Then, the Esteemed Governor will have to die."

Warden's expression changed, becoming colder and more dangerous than before.

Eventually, he said indifferently:

"We can't kill him without justification, though."

Jest laughed.

"Can't we? Well, leave that to me. If he attacks me first, we'll be justified in defending ourselves, won't we? Ah, but make no mistake. It won't be just the Governor… his people are just as guilty, and they won't be happy to see their own justification disappear. In fact, they'll quickly appoint a new figurehead and continue perpetrating monstrous acts with impunity."

Warden looked at him darkly.

"Haven't we gotten pretty good at killing monsters, though?"

Jest smiled.

"That we did…"

The Warden remained silent for a while, then nodded.

"Then. I'll delegate that part to you."

***

Two days later, the interior of the dome was neither orderly nor neat anymore.

Instead, it was a bloodbath.

The Esteemed Temporary Governor was dead. His most loyal warriors were dead, too — the others had either surrendered or ran away.

It was quite a feat, for the small group of Awakened warriors led by Warden to dismantle the entire local force despite being outnumbered ten to one. However, numbers did not matter too much against a well-coordinated attack. Especially if it started with a sudden decapitation strike.

Plus, the local Awakened were no match for Warden and his people. After all, those who habitually trampled the weak usually fell apart when facing the strong… and the warriors who had conquered the ancient castle were very strong.

Jest had killed the Governor himself. He incited the poor fool to attack by combining his Awakened and Dormant Abilities, then gutted him right there in the opulent dining room.

It had not been too hard. In fact, it had been rather easy… he usually struggled when fighting abominations, since those were mindless beasts. But humans were intelligent creatures, and extreme anger robbed them of their most dangerous weapon — their intellect.

So, for him, killing humans was both easier and more rewarding.

The Governor was a powerful Awakened, but he succumbed to Jest's knife all the same. As the fool's body hit the floor, Jest did not feel much pride… or much of any kind of emotion, really.

Just the satisfaction of feeling his body becoming stronger.

After that, they swiftly and strategically dealt with the Governor's supporters. Now, there were a few dozen captive soldiers kneeling in the courtyard of the luxurious mansion while they searched it for any stragglers.

That was when they discovered the hidden cellar.

…A few minutes later, Jest came back on weak legs and crouched in

the hallway, breathing heavily.

Then, he shuddered and vomited on the luxurious carpet, his eyes trembling slightly.

Warden emerged from the basement a minute or two later, pale as a ghost.

Both of them remained silent for a while, looking at each other with pale faces.

In the end, Jest was the first one to speak:

"I… I think I understand what you meant. Back there, on the wall of the castle. These people… someone needs to stop them, right?"

Warden took a deep breath.

A few moments later, he said coldly:

"They are not people."

In the end, the captives did not survive the day, either.

Warden did not execute them — instead, he simply handed them to the mundane inhabitants of the dome in restraints.

Perhaps executing them swiftly would have been more merciful.

Observing the bloody spectacle outside the wall, Jest sighed...

It pained him to see all these soul fragments going to waste.

Chapter-2154: Off the Cuff

Cassie witnessed the inception of the Great Clan Valor — of the force that would shape the future of humanity in accordance with its will. Warden's reluctant determination to become one of the cornerstones that held up the new world would pay off, propelling him to the height of power in the coming years.

That was how history was made, it seemed. Not by vast armies or mystical powers, but by the will of a determined individual — as long as that will was sharp enough to leave a mark on the world.

Granted, Warden himself was not destined to become an individual whose personal power could trample armies. His son, however, would… by following in his father's footsteps.

Wasn't it bitterly ironic, then, that the cleaner world Warden wished to create for his children would be drowned in blood by them?

…Perhaps it was inevitable, since what they inherited from him was a legacy of war, not peace.

The beautiful castle he had turned into a bastion of humanity was now a ruined battlefield where his grandchildren were struggling to kill each other, and his son had gathered a great army to slaughter other people, not creatures summoned by the Spell.

That was his sin, as well.

At that moment, Cassie sensed a movement. By now, it was not just a subtle twitch… Jest's hand rose weakly, and then fell again, hanging limp.

She shivered and delved deeper into his memories, in a hurry to find traces of Anvil.

This time, finally, she succeeded.

A vague memory surfaced from the well of them — brief, but etched with deep, bittersweet emotions.

…Jest exited a luxurious PTV and inhaled deeply, enjoying the clean air of NQSC. Now that the problem with the barriers had been resolved, people could breathe freely here once again — well, closer to the center, at least.

His posture was full of confidence, and his dashing figure was made even more eye-catching by a suit of elegant, expensive clothes. Now that Jest had credits to spare, he made a point of enjoying the finer things in life — something he had been deprived of during his youth.

It was definitely not to compensate for his inability to wear fancy Memories. Not at all!

'Who needs those clunky suits of armor, anyway?'

Smiling, he walked between the Awakened warriors guarding the entrance to a newly built administrative complex and walked inside. No one dared to stop him, since everyone knew who he was… actually, what the hell, why had no one at least checked his ID? There were all kinds of Aspects out there, so one could never be too careful…

Then again, the power of the people who had gathered inside was so fearsome that only a lunatic would try to stage an attack.

'Damn. But the world is still full of lunatics!'

Jest sighed.

Five years had already passed since the day the Nightmare Spell descended. By now, the world was slowly overcoming the dire state of instability it had undergone at the start. Of course, there were still countless problems, big and small, but there was at least a semblance of order in most of the Quadrants — and here in NQSC especially.

In large part, it was thanks to the people that had gathered today… and Jest himself, as well, even if what he did was usually less

glamorous.

A few minutes later, he entered a room where Warden was seated in a chair, looking mildly uncomfortable — not that many people would recognize genuine emotions behind his flawlessly stoic facade. There were two young women here, too, working on his hair and makeup.

Jest couldn't help but laugh.

"Oh, oh gods. Never have I imagined seeing you in makeup, Lord Warden."

Warden looked at him sideways, seemingly afraid to turn his head and disturb the makeup artist. If looks could kill, Jest would probably fall dead at the spot.

"That… others insisted. I am going to address all of humanity today, after all."

Jest grinned.

"Good luck… to humanity. Witnessing your mug will be a great shock for many, no doubt. Let them suffer, I say! Like I have suffered all these years."

Today was indeed a special day. Because today, they were announcing the formation of the United Human Government — an overarching organization meant to facilitate the cooperation of disparate human strongholds, serve as connective tissue between independent Awakened champions, and oversee the infrastructure of populated areas of the planet.

That was why brilliant figures like Warden, Immortal Flame, Nightwalker, and many other powerhouses were all in the same building today.

Of course, that name — the United Human Government — was merely a bold proclamation. In truth, humanity was far from being united. Most of the planet was indeed under the control of their coalition now, but there were still powerful adversaries left in its corners.

The Americas seemed to come around last year, but the Supremacists were still holding ground in the South. The entire Western Quadrant was under the control of Caliban and his cabal of demented fiends, all indoctrinated by his eerily sinister ideology. The Dream Cult was still prevalent in many places, and the Path of Ascension zealots were steadily gaining ground right here in NQSC.

There were many smaller cities that had yet to be liberated from the Nightmare Creatures, too.

In short, there was still a lot of work to do.

Which was why Jest was late to arrive today.

Warden hesitated for a few moments, then asked the makeup artist and the hair stylist to leave. Once they were gone, he looked at Jest evenly.

"How did it go?"

Jest shrugged.

"There was a bit of collateral damage. Unfortunate, but inevitable. In any case, it went well — those old regime fogies won't be a problem anymore. We'll be able to take full control of the water distribution system and purification plants by the end of the week, then hand them to the UHG. Obviously, that will also make the negotiations with the Farmers moot — they won't last long if we cut water supply to their precious hydroponics. And without a stable source of food, all other holdouts will fall in line. In short, there'll be no independent factions controlling vital infrastructure here in NQSC anymore. All thanks to yours truly."

He grinned.

Warden sighed, then nodded curtly.

After a few moments, he said:

"There's blood on your sleeve."

Jest flinched.

"What? Ah, crap… that's a bespoke shirt, damn it!"

He pulled the cuff of his shirt from under his jacket's sleeve, studied the degree of damage, then grimaced and tore the entire cuff off.

Of course, not before removing the expensive cuff link first. Those were a gift from his wife, so he could not lose them.

'Oh no, my shirt...'

Throwing the bloodied cuff into a trashcan, Jest sighed dejectedly and glanced at Warden.

"Well, anyway. You go ahead and prepare for your speech… I'll go say hello to the kids."

Warden nodded.

"Tell the makeup team to come in on your way out. And… good job today."

Jest smiled.

"Why, of course. When have I ever not done a good job?"

The last five years had not been peaceful… in fact, they were stained by endless bloodshed. Power came at a great cost, and one had to pay for it in blood — either their own or that of their opponents.

So, Jest had long lost count of the number of such missions he had undertaken on behalf of Warden, both openly and in secret. It was not very enjoyable work… most of the time… but he prided himself on being good at it.

Most importantly, it mattered. Because he was not spilling blood for personal gain or to satisfy his greed. He was spilling it to build a better future for everyone, and especially for his family.

Now that Jest was a father himself, he understood how Warden had felt, all those years ago.

Forgetting about the bloodied cuff, Jest headed for the door.

"Oh! Is your youngest here today?"

Warden nodded with a smile.

"Yes, he is."

Jest chuckled.

"Good, good. Although I still can't believe that you actually gave him that name. That is, like… child abuse? Hello! Don't you have any shame?"

Warden shook his head.

"You won't understand. Anvil is different from Madoc…"

And standing in the dark jungle of Godgrave, Cassie smiled subtly while Jest's hands twitched.

'Found you.'

Chapter-2155: Human Connections

Whistling a happy tune, Jest made his way to a different part of the complex.

The important people were preparing to make the historic announcement, and would be busy discussing various matters after that — it was not every day that they gathered in one place, so there was a lot to talk about.

It was also important to simply spend time together and get to know each other. Some of the famed champions of humanity had already met, and even fought side by side on many occasions, but some were barely acquainted. If the coalition was to last, its pillars had to share a sense of unity.

Despite how much the world had changed, there was still nothing quite as effective in building trust as looking the other person in the eye and shaking their hand.

Grand matters and shared strategic interests notwithstanding, personal connections were still the most important and fundamental element of human relationships, trampling all else. So, the exalted champions of humanity… were going to hang out.

And while they were doing that, their families would spend time together as well. The wives, the husbands, the children — they had to build connections too, so that the framework of the tentative new coalition was cemented.

Warden might have had to give a solemn speech, announcing the formation of the United Human Government to the world, but the actual new world order was going to be built behind closed doors, in heavily guarded backrooms, where the families of Warden and other

champions were mingling and forming a different kind of union.

One that would become their true legacy.

Well… and also, all these powerhouses were paranoid — for a good reason, too. They weren't going to leave their loved ones unguarded while every warrior who was worth anything was away, so they simply took their families with them.

Jest was no different. His son and his wife, who was pregnant with their second child, were somewhere here, as well. After the bloody morning, he couldn't wait to see them.

There was a large room in the depths of the complex that was furnished splendidly, with comfortable sofas, various refreshments set on wooden tables, and plenty of toys scattered on the floor of the playing area that was arranged in the center. The lighting imitated daylight, and a beautiful view that seemed to reproduce the beautiful vistas around Bastion was projected on the walls.

The room was filled with a relaxed atmosphere… or rather, it would have been if not for the energetic kind of chaos that spawned anytime a group of children congregated.

The first person Jest noticed was, of course, his wife. Her pregnancy was barely showing, so a person who did not know her well would probably not even notice the difference — but he, of course, could see it clearly.

In fact, Jest had started joking about how pregnant she looked as soon as they received the good news. His wife was usually one of the few people whose sense of humor was sophisticated enough to appreciate his genius, but this time, she kept missing the point for whatever reason.

She never missed when she punched Jest in response, though, so while he had not earned any laughs recently, he did earn more than a few bruises — his wife was an Awakened too, after all. Her punches carried both weight and purpose.

Come to think of it…

Hadn't she unexplainably lost her sense of humor the last time she was pregnant, too?

'Probably hormones…'

She was talking to a beautiful, elegant mundane woman of about their age, who seemed to be Immortal Flame's wife. Jest spared a moment or two to study her exquisite features and striking grey eyes.

Immortal Flame himself was a fiery guy, so it was a bit strange to see that his wife was like a calm, placid lake. That said… despite being mundane, she had a strong presence, as if there was a core of solid steel hidden beneath the deep waters of that lake.

That woman had character.

Well… of course, she had. Not just anyone could be the life partner of an exceptional man like Immortal Flame, and out of those who had survived the descent of the Nightmare Spell, there were only two types of people — those who broke, and those who became so tough that nothing could break them.

It was a good thing that Immortal Flame and his family were now their allies. If things had turned out differently… Jest could not help but shiver. An enemy like that would have to be uprooted and exterminated completely, because leaving adversaries of this caliber alive was no different from signing your own death certificate.

Luckily, Immortal Flame was a reasonable man despite his fiery temperament.

Approaching the two women with a pleasant smile, Jest greeted them happily and then looked around the room.

"Where are the kids?"

The kids, of course, were up to no good.

He found them in a corner, discussing something in hushed voices.

Well, an adorable little girl was discussing something, while the three boys around her were just listening with obedient expressions.

The oldest of them was about five years old and wore a hesitant expression, as if unsure of why he was listening to the tiny, but bossy little girl. Jest knew this one all too well, since it was Madoc, Warden's oldest.

The next one was Jest's own little rogue. His son was four, and had mischievous sparks dancing in his innocent eyes. That innocence was pure deceit, of course… the little fella was a real menace, to the point that Jest never knew whether to despair or feel proud when confronted by his mischief.

The impossibly cute girl was, without a doubt, Immortal Flame's daughter. Her bright smile was a sight to behold, and there were adorable dimples on her chubby cheeks… she seemed to be the ringleader.

And finally, there was a timid boy who was not quite three yet, same as the girl. This was probably the first time he had found himself surrounded by so many strangers, so he stuck close to the outgoing girl and listened to her carefully.

Seeing such a serious expression on such a cute face made Jest want to laugh.

The boy, of course, was Anvil, Warden's younger son.

Noticing him, little Anvil suddenly smiled and waved a hand.

"Uncle Jest!"

Jest waved back.

'Ah… but really. Anvil? Poor kid… he will really need to develop a sense of humor, with a name like that…'

Chapter-2156: Flexible Steel

Little Anvil was not so little anymore, having just turned seven. He had somehow grew into something that resembled an actual person now, albeit a mini version, and one could already recognize his father's features in his earnest, serious face.

Too serious, even. Jest had often wondered what kind of kids Warden would raise — with how serious and prone to giving lectures about chivalry the man was, his poor children were bound to grow up with a severe deficiency of fun in their lives.

It was already showing…

Perhaps that was why Anvil liked to hang out with Immortal Flame's daughter so much.

At the moment, though, he was laying on the ground, breathing heavily and staring at the sky with bleak eyes.

Jest coughed.

"That, uh… maybe we should end things here today."

The kid was weirdly fit for someone his age, but the training regime Warden forced upon the poor fellow was way too intense. Little Anvil really did nothing but study and practice all day long, which was a sad thing to see.

Then again, Jest understood Warden completely… in fact, all of them, the original Awakened, were a bit too harsh on their children.

That was because the Nightmare Spell was continuing to reap lives, with new youths contracting it each year. The thought of his son being sent into a Nightmare made Jest sweat, which was why he and his wife trained their little devil with an almost equal — but not

quite — level of intensity.

They had faced the horrors of the Nightmare Spell unprepared, so if there was something — anything — they could do to coach their children on how to survive the danger, they were willing to do it. Not everyone had such a wealth of resources at their disposal, but they did, and so they used it thoroughly.

Thankfully, their second son was too young for sword practice… for now. Still, his training would have to start soon.

…No one was trained more intensely than poor Anvil, though, both in swordsmanship and intellectual pursuits.

Warden was not so strict even with Madoc, who was two years older. By now, Jest knew why, and while he understood that the younger of the two brothers had a different, somewhat inhuman constitution, it was still a shame to see him waste his childhood this way.

Anvil himself did not seem to mind, though.

Shaking his head, the boy sighed, then rose to his feet wearily and picked up the wooden sword.

"No, Uncle Jest… I can go again. Please instruct me."

Jest sighed. He didn't even want to joke at the moment.

'Warden… ah, I really need to talk to him.'

Warden was, without a doubt, an exceptional man. He was a fearsome warrior and benevolent leader, and more importantly than that, he was someone with a great and clear vision. Even his enemies did not question his nobility, and his intellect was truly formidable.

More than that, he was Jest's closest friend and benefactor. It would not be a stretch to say that everything Jest had was because of Warden… he would not even be alive if not for that excessively serious guy. His life would have ended on the day of the winter solstice, all those years ago.

And yet, despite what many seemed to think, Warden wasn't perfect.

In particular, as far as Jest could see, he was not treating his children — especially Anvil — right. Warden approached their education with his usual level of seriousness, and although he meant well, children also needed warmth and affection. Especially these two, who had lost their mother young.

It had happened during the First Gate Crisis… that damn disaster. Many people had suspected that the Nightmare Spell had more terrors in store for humanity, but still, no one expected that a few years after the first Awakened returned from the Dream Realm, the Dream Realm would follow them to Earth through the Nightmare Gates.

The Gates kept opening, and no one managed to close one yet.

Jest frowned.

There was no telling what other calamities the Nightmare Spell had in store. The future they were trying to build was dark and unclear.

So… perhaps Warden had the right idea to prepare his sons for the worst, after all.

'Ah, I don't know anymore…'

Jest remained silent for a moment, then smiled warmly.

"Sure, kid. Let's go again… be sure not to let go of your sword this time."

Since most of the human enemies that had threatened them were gone now, he had a lot of free time on his hands. That was why Warden had asked him to give Anvil lessons.

There were better swordsmen out there, of course, but there were few killers better than Jest in the world… if any.

Two worlds, really.

So, what he had to teach Anvil was not the sword, per se, but rather combat. Real battle was never clean and orderly like training spars — both people and Nightmare Creatures fought dirty, using anything

and everything they could to kill the enemy and survive. Desperation was the best teacher, but it was hard for a child from a noble family to really taste it.

Clutching his wooden sword, Anvil frowned. Jest chuckled.

"What's with that bitter expression?"

The little boy looked at him somberly, and then said in a guarded tone:

"Uncle Jest… since you are telling me to hold onto my sword, you'll probably ignore it completely and just smack me on the body, right?"

Jest grinned.

"It seems you did learn something!"

With that, he attacked… ignoring the boy's wooden sword and aiming directly at his body, instead.

After a few exchanges, Anvil found himself on the ground again and sighed.

This time, he did not hurry to stand up.

"I see. So today's lesson is misdirection."

Jest stared at the little boy, then shook his head in dejection.

"You are way too honest and upright, boy. There's no honesty in battle, though. Your enemies will try to deceive you, and you must know how to both see through their deceit and deceive them in turn."

Anvil frowned.

"But isn't Father an honest and upright man, too?"

Jest laughed.

"Who, Warden? Why, of course. He is the honestest and the uprightest… but he can be cunning and crooked when he needs to, too. A true warrior can't be too rigid in his thinking. He has to be

flexible, or he'll die."

The little boy nodded seriously.

"Like steel."

He considered something for a few moments, then smiled.

"A good sword has to be flexible, too. Rigid blades will break faster. I understand now, Uncle Jest!"

Jest gave him a dubious glance, not sure what if the boy really understood.

Then, he shrugged.

"Well, if you do, get up and go clean yourself. I'll take you into the city to eat something tasty."

Anvil looked at him with a childish expression, which made Jest happy — it was nice seeing the boy act like a kid for a change.

Eventually, though, Anvil sighed.

"Father hired a nutrition specialist to oversee my meals. I am… forbidden from eating ice cream…"

Jest smiled benevolently.

"Why, then we can take the nutrition specialist with us. I'm sure that we can find a nutritious ice cream, with some help… and even if we can't, Warden doesn't need to know everything, right?"

The boy's eyes widened.

Jest thought that it was a look of admiration at first, but then realized that there was a tall figure reflecting in Anvil's eyes.

Turning around, he saw Warden, who was walking across the garden with wide steps.

The man looked strangely intense.

Jest coughed.

"Listen, man… Lord Warden. I didn't mean it that way, okay? I was definitely not teaching your kid how to deceive his father..."

But Warden ignored his words and just stared at him.

Jest felt that something was wrong.

"What?"

Warden remained silent for a few moments, and then suddenly smiled fiercely.

"It's Immortal Flame. That guy. He closed a Nightmare Gate!"

Chapter-2157: Seeds of Calamity

What Immortal Flame had accomplished changed everything. Even before the news of his Ascension spread around the world like a tidal wave, igniting the hearts of countless people, it had shaken the hearts of those who held both the greatest power and the greatest responsibility in the dire world of the Nightmare Spell… of people like Warden.

The repercussions were too significant.

Knowing the importance of what he had learned inside the Seed of Nightmare, Immortal Flame wasn't shy about sharing the information. An urgent meeting between the members of the prominent families was arranged, and soon, the powerhouses of humanity gathered in a heavily guarded government complex.

As one of Warden's elites, Jest attended as well.

Everything they learned from the Immortal Flame was astonishing.

First, the nature of Ascension — the further evolution of one's body, the qualitative increase in the potency of soul essence, the unimaginable degree with which one could control it as an Ascended, the unsealing of the third Aspect Ability, and most importantly of all… the ability to enter the Dream Realm whenever one wanted.

Or not enter it at all.

All of them were seasoned and powerful Awakened warriors, but witnessing what Immortal Flame was now capable of, even just on a purely physical level, was enough to leave them all stunned. That… was an entirely new level of might that they could not have dreamed about.

Not even superhuman power, but an inhuman one.

Something that would finally allow them to contend against Fallen Nightmare Creatures on equal footing, and therefore alleviate the crushing pressure every one of them was experiencing, both in the real world and in the Dream Realm.

Take Bastion, for example… although it had become a beacon of safety for the humans of the Dream Realm, the actual situation in the castle was not too good these days. That was because without the red dragon, the abominable forest that surrounded Warden's Citadel was growing more and more terrifying with each year.

By now, Bastion was besieged from all sides, and the only way to stave off the enemy was to venture out on frequent punitive expeditions to cull the abominations spawned by the dark woods, burning large swathes of the forest in the process. Each of these expeditions was more onerous and deadly than the previous one, and the balance of power was slowly shifting in favor of the sprawling dark mass of the eerie Titan.

Ascension offered a chance to swing the balance back in favor of humans.

Then, there was the freedom from the clutches of the Nightmare Spell it offered. All Awakened had no choice but to enter the Dream Realm when they slept… and the Dream Realm was a harsh and inhospitable hell.

Bastion was one of the strongest Citadels of humanity in its dark expanse, and even it was barely standing… there was no need to mention how hard the lives in the smaller human enclaves were. Surviving was hard, and casualties were a constant. The Citadels were like small, trembling flames, shining weakly in the endless expanse of chilling and impenetrable darkness.

So, for most Awakened, the mere possibility of never having to enter the Dream Realm again would be like a ray of hope.

For those in charge of humanity, however, something else held much more significance… it was not the allure of greater power that Ascension offered, and not even the promise of remaining in the real world forever.

It was the fact that conquering a Seed was now the only proven method of closing a Nightmare Gate. The Gates had become a plague after first appearing a few years ago, and their number only continued to grow. There were already a dozen or so exclusion zones in NQSC alone, and constant military presence was required to eliminate the emerging abominations.

The scale of the problem was manageable… for now. But anyone with the smallest amount of foresight could see the writing on the wall — sooner or later, the Nightmare Gates were going to swallow all human population centers.

Unless they were dealt with.

And Immortal Flame had shown them a way to do just that.

Finally, there was the last shocking part of his report.

It was the truth of what was hidden inside the Nightmare Seeds.

Immortal Flame, of course, was not the first person who had entered one of them. However, he and those of his comrades who had survived were the first ones to return alive, and therefore, the first people who could tell the rest of humanity about what awaited Awakened inside the Nightmare Seeds.

The truth was something that many had theorized, but none had been able to prove.

It was another Nightmare… a Second Nightmare.

Just like the trial that every Awakened faced after contracting the Spell, a new Nightmare awaited them inside the Seeds — this one far more deadly and demanding, with enemies that were far more powerful than most of them had ever had to fight.

However, there was another difference to the Second Nightmare, one that had the potential to have decisive influence on the next few years. It was that, according to the Immortal Flame, these new harrowing Nightmares were not individual trials, but rather meant to be challenged by groups of Awakened.

The idea of a Nightmare that many people could challenge was preposterous, but it was nevertheless true. Jest was quite shocked by the unexpected turn of events, but in hindsight, nothing about the Nightmare Spell had ever been predictable.

The news of Immortal Flame's Ascension was announced a few days after the meeting. Not long after that, the prominent Awakened gathered once more, this time for an official celebration…

It was just before the celebration that Warden looked at Jest somberly and said, his voice full of familiar determination.

"We must do it, Jest. We must Ascend."

Jest sighed.

"Yeah, sure. But hold your horses — you know better than I do how many people died while challenging the Seeds. The fact that Immortal Flame returned alive doesn't mean that from now on, everyone will too. We must prepare thoroughly… there is no rush."

But Warden shook his head.

"You are wrong. There is a rush. Don't you see?"

Looking at the streets of NQSC that moved past the window of their PTV, Warden gritted his teeth.

"The fact that there is a Second Nightmare… means that there will be a Third, as well. And the Fourth."

His expression darkened.

"Which also means that after the First Gate Crisis, there will be the Second. And the Third. And so on… that is a reasonable extrapolation. These Nightmare Gates we are dealing with will soon become more terrible. What will we do when Corrupted Nightmare Creatures start entering the waking world?"

Jest shivered.

Corrupted Nightmare Creatures... were legendary monsters

synonymous with death. Just one of them could wipe out most of NQSC, since there was no one here to stop it.

Except for Immortal Flame and his surviving companions.

Noticing the lack of a humorous response, Warden nodded and looked at him silently.

Eventually, he said:

"That is why we must Ascend, Jest. As soon as possible."

Chapter-2158: Old Guard

In the end, there had not been a Second Gate Crisis.

That was because people like Warden had anticipated that Category Three Gates would start appearing in the near future, and prepared accordingly.

It cost them a lot.

For a few years after Immortal Flame had conquered the Second Nightmare, the higher echelons of humanity were overcome by great ambition, great determination… and great sorrow.

There were countless celebrations, and countless funerals.

Almost all the best and the brightest of humanity answered the Call of Nightmare, entering the blooming Seeds to face the trial of the Spell. Many returned victorious, but many had perished, as well.

It was as if the old guard was being culled. Jest had lost count of how many of his old acquaintances — all seasoned veterans and survivors of the Spell's descent — had lost their lives in the pursuit of Ascension.

But he survived. Warden survived, too, becoming an Ascended in the tenth year of the Nightmare Spell era… people like them were more and more often called Masters, now.

Both of them were in their thirties now.

They weren't young, but the ruthless world kept changing around them at the same rapid pace.

In the Dream Realm, Warden managed to push the monstrous forest back from the walls of Bastion… for a time, at least. Despite having

reached Ascension, they still could not contend against a Fallen Titan — all they could do was contain it, and slow down its growth.

Jest himself had left Bastion and traveled south along the river, conquering the strategic Citadel that stood halfway between the Mirror Lake and Stormsea. With Rivergate in human hands, it was now possible to connect with Nightwalker and the other champions of that nebulous region of the Dream Realm.

Many more Citadels were conquered at that time, as well. While the River of Tears basin in the west was still largely underdeveloped, with every human enclave isolated from the rest, things were changing here in the heartland of the Dream Realm.

Humans were slowly uniting around Bastion and Warden, and the Citadels were supporting each other to present a united front against the horrors of the Nightmare Spell.

Things were changing in the waking world, too.

Almost all remaining cities were now under the control of the United Human Government and the Awakened forces standing behind it. The mad ruler of the Western Quadrant, Caliban, had been eliminated — the less powerful local tyrants had all been either killed or persuaded to join the new world order, as well.

Quite a few of those who persisted in their misguided ways died by Jest's own hand. He had been deadly even as an Awakened, and his power and lethality only exploded after becoming a Master.

The Dream Cult had been ruthlessly suppressed and erased from the annals of history, replaced by the powerful propaganda machine of the government. The Awakened Supremacy movement had been eradicated. Countless smaller gangs, cults, movements, and extremist factions were all gone now, and a semblance of if not peace, then at least stability enveloped the world.

Even the Ascension zealots were gone now… this particular faction had not been too malicious, but there was still no place for it in the new world order. Which was a shame, considering how powerful many of them were — in fact, while Immortal Flame was the first one

to conquer the Second Nightmare, it was the Path of Ascension believers who had braved it second, much earlier than even Warden himself.

While most Awakened dreamed of becoming Masters in order to never enter the Dream Realm again, the Ascension zealots wanted the opposite. So, after being pressured and persecuted by the dominant forces of the human world, they simply left it forever and established a colony somewhere in the Dream Realm, never to be heard of again.

Jest was not sorry to see the lunatics go.

Not that he had a lot of time to spare them any thought.

Busy, busy, busy… if there was one word to describe their lives in the past few years, it was busy.

So busy that he did not even really notice when his older son had turned into a temperamental teenager, and his younger son started school.

'Gods. Look at this guy! He's taller than me!'

Jest was just contemplating spending more time with his children when he noticed Anvil, now fourteen years old, practicing with a sword in solitude.

He was currently visiting the Valor residence to discuss a few important matters with Warden — a frequent occurrence now that they were anchored at different Citadels in the Dream Realm. Traveling from Rivergate to Bastion did not take a lot of time, but it was still more convenient to meet here in NQSC. So, he was often a guest here.

His lessons with Anvil had long been canceled, though, because the little fiend was already a far better swordsman than Jest himself was. So was Madoc — now the two brothers just sparred with each other when they needed a partner, and taught each other as well.

They were both monstrously talented, even if Anvil had an edge over his older brother due to a special lineage.

Noticing Jest, Anvil smiled subtly and put down the sword.

"Uncle Jest. What a nice surprise."

Jest grinned.

"That's what she… actually, never mind. How have you been, kid?"

Anvil nodded.

"Thank you. I've been doing well."

'Ah. He's still too prim and proper.'

Although Madoc and Anvil were both talented and diligent, one thing they were missing under Warden's strict oversight was liveliness.

Today, however, Warden's younger son seemed troubled.

He hesitated for a few moments, then asked tentatively.

"Uncle Jest. Do you think that Madoc… will he be alright?"

Jest raised an eyebrow.

"Why wouldn't he be alright?"

A shadow crossed the boy's face.

"Because he turned sixteen."

Jest blinked.

Sixteen.

Most of the youths who contracted the Spell were between sixteen and eighteen years of age.

'...Madoc is already sixteen, huh?'

At that point, someone would say… gods! How fast time had passed!

But not Jest. To him, it felt like a dozen lifetimes had passed between

the day Madoc was born and now.

However…

Since Madoc was already sixteen, his own son will be, too, in a year.

He remained silent for a while, then smiled.

"Madoc? That guy? Bah! Of course, he'll be alright. Don't you worry about him, worry about yourself instead…"

And indeed, Madoc was alright. A year passed, and he was yet to show any symptoms of having contracted the Nightmare Spell.

So, Jest allowed himself to feel hopeful, too.

'Maybe it's really… really going to be alright.'

But then, one day, when he returned home...

His son's sleepy eyes met him, and the boy said after a big yawn.

"Ah, dad… sorry… can we skip practice today? I feel a bit tired."

Jest's heart stopped.

Chapter-2159: Empty Cradle

In the basement of Jest's lavish mansion at the heart of NQSC, behind several layers of armored alloy and defended by a cutting-edge spelltech defense system, lay a square chamber with video walls that displayed a beautiful panoramic view of Rivergate.

There were two sleeping pods installed there side by side — once luxurious and expensive, but now old and obsolete. Jest and his wife had used them once, but since both of them were Masters now and did not venture into the Dream Realm in their sleep, the sleeping pods had just been gathering dust for the last few years.

Not that they were really dusty. The entire mansion was spotlessly clean, both due to robotic cleaners and mundane staff.

But today, one of the pods had an occupant.

Jest's older son was laying there, sleeping peacefully, while Jest himself was sitting on a folding chair nearby and watching him with an expressionless face.

He had been sitting there for two days without moving.

Only his mind was restless and alive.

'Come on, boy… come on. Your old man survived, so you can survive too. You are so much better than me. You can do it...'

It had not taken long for his son to succumb to the Spell after displaying the first symptoms. He was in the First Nightmare now, fighting for his life… and Jest was stuck here — by his side, but unable to help.

He could not help, and at the same time, he felt more helpless than ever before.

Wasn't it funny? Jest had spent the first two decades of his life barely clinging to life, then spent many more years in regular brushes with death. And yet, he had never felt more powerless than now.

Perhaps it was funny, but for the first time since the Spell descended, he could not find the strength to smile.

'Come on…'

Slowly, every conversation he had ever had with Warden were surfacing in his mind. Everything that the two of them had done — every glorious victory, every triumph against all odds, every noble sacrifice… every dirty scheme, every cold-blooded execution, every innocent life lost as collateral damage in pursuit of greater good — it had all been for this, had it not?

To build a world where their children could live with their heads held high.

They had spilled the blood and built that world, so surely, their children would survive?

Jest had known nothing and had nothing when the Spell called him into the First Nightmare. He did not know how to fight, how to wield weapons, how to procure food, how to find shelter from the elements. He had not known what Aspects were, why Attributes were important, how to harvest and absorb soul shards…

But his son knew it all, and then some. He had been taught and trained by the best instructors in the world, preparing for this day from early childhood. His training had been both thorough and extensive, bordering on excessive… Jest and his wife were among the best warriors of humanity and imparted as much as they could on him, as well.

So, surely…

Jest had never prayed to anyone or anything before, but he was praying now.

Even though the gods were dead, he hoped that something would listen.

He prayed to the gods, to the Demons.

He even prayed to the Nightmare Spell.

'Come on…'

But his prayers had gone unanswered.

…He felt it before he saw it. A subtle, almost imperceptible shift in the atmosphere, as if the air in the underground chamber had suddenly become heavier.

Colder, darker, and more sinister.

It was not really something Jest felt with his body, but rather what he felt with his soul.

His eyes trembled slightly.

In the brightly illuminated cradle of the sleeping pod, his son's eyelids trembled, too.

For a moment, Jest hoped that the little fiend would wake up and open his eyes.

But instead, his son's body twitched, and then arched, a low growl escaping from between his lips.

Something moved under his skin, as if his bones were growing and rearranging themselves, pressing against it from below.

Jest continued to watch silently, paralyzed.

Eventually, though…

He slowly stood up and walked toward the sleeping pod weakly.

Sitting down on its edge, he pulled his son into an embrace and held him tightly, struggling against the movements that were growing more and more fierce.

He tasted it again… the salty taste of tears on his tongue.

So he still had tears to shed, it seemed.

Just like on that day, in front of the barrack.

Jest opened his mouth:

"Shhh…"

He inhaled deeply.

"It's alright, boy. It's alright. You did well… you did the best you could."

Of course, the thing he was holding was not his son anymore.

But Jest just held it tighter.

"It's alright… you did well…"

After a while…

An eternity, perhaps.

Jest left the basement and closed the door behind him.

He knew that his wife was waiting for him upstairs, half-dead from the dreadful anticipation of uncertain news.

He had to tell her now, but was not brave enough to face her just yet.

Instead, Jest turned to the wall and leaned on it, breathing heavily.

The armored alloy felt cool against his forehead.

'Ah…'

His mind was empty.

'Ah...'

Some time later, his gaze focused on his wrist.

There, on the cuff of his expensive shirt…

The white fabric had turned vibrant red with blood.

Jest stared at it for a while, his eyes slowly growing less cloudy.

A crooked smile suddenly split his face apart.

He remembered another bloodied cuff, and a conversation that had happened a long time ago.

What was it that he had said?

'... A bit of collateral damage. Unfortunate, but inevitable. In any case, it went well.'

They had been so matter-of-fact about it. And why wouldn't they? How many of these unfortunate occurrences had there been? He had lost count. If Jest wasted energy caring about each of them — any of them — he would have spent his entire life spilling tears.

He was too busy spilling blood, though. One could not build a new world without mortar, after all, and definitely not without breaking a few bricks… a dozen or a thousand, it did not matter.

But those broken bricks had been someone's sons and daughters, too.

He grinned terribly.

"So… is this my punishment then?"

Was it?

Before Jest knew what he was doing, he brought his head back, and then hit it against the wall, as if wishing to crack his skull open.

But his skull did not crack, of course.

Instead, the armored alloy bent and cracked, and a deep indent was formed on its surface.

He was a Master, after all.

'Ah, ah…'

The world was bitter.

The gods had died, and were replaced by the Nightmare Spell.

And the Spell…

It was a wicked god.

The only kind of god he deserved, perhaps.

Chapter-2160: Past and Future

About a year later, Jest was leaning on the wall of a random building, feeling dizzy from drinking too much. It was hard for an Ascended to get drunk, but he had smuggled a bottle of special brew from the Dream Realm — it wasn't made from mundane stuff, so its effect was correspondingly outstanding.

He had fallen apart, a little, after his older son's death — not too much, but just enough to allow himself a day or two of drowning in self-pity every few months or so.

After all, Jest still had another son to take care of. His wife needed him, as well… and Warden, too, although now that all the enemies of the new world order had been eliminated, there was rarely a need to use his services.

That last fact was slowly changing as of late. Not because new external adversaries were rising, but simply because the new order had become robust enough, and had existed for long enough, that internal threats were.

Now, Warden had to put effort into maintaining if not control, then at least a decisive amount of influence over the unwieldy apparatus of human governance. Jest had to help from time to time — his work these days was usually less bloody, and he served as more of a scarecrow than an executioner.

…Usually.

'Ah, I'm sick of it. When will it end?'

When would he and Warden be able to get some rest? Work, work, work… for two decades, almost, they had done nothing but work tirelessly.

He imagined the two of them retired, sipping wine in some warm garden in Bastion while their grandkids played around, and giggled.

'Bah. With how stiff that guy is, I doubt he'll ever settle down.'

Jest grimaced, then took another sip of the bitter brew.

In front of him, in the distance, the workers were finishing constructing the Awakened Academy. Looking at the mighty wall defending the complex from a distance, Jest smiled darkly.

'Bastards. Took them long enough…'

Many things had changed in the last year. More of the children of the original Awakened had contracted the Nightmare Spell… some survived, some didn't. Of course, countless children had perished to the Spell already, but these ones were different.

Because they were the first infected who had been born after the descent of the Nightmare Spell, and grew up not knowing anything but its dire new world.

The Second Generation.

Looking at the gates of the Academy being hoisted up, Jest suddenly felt like he was back to that day when he returned to the barrack, only to find himself unable to walk through the broken door.

A dark, deep sense of futility overwhelmed him, and he hurried to wash it away with the bitter taste of alcohol.

'That's good. That's better…'

He wasn't watching alone, either. At some point, another figure appeared in the alley, walking past him without even noticing — well, it wasn't surprising. Jest was standing in the shadows, after all, and actively suppressing his presence. That was a habit he had developed after perpetrating numerous assassinations.

It was someone he knew, in fact. Awakened Orum… a nice enough guy. Not too powerful and not too ambitious, but solid and reliable. He, too, was a member of the First Generation, and since his Citadel

was in the general area of influence exerted by Bastion, the two of them had fought side by side a few times.

Still, Jest would have preferred if no one disturbed his solitude.

When the gates of the Academy were installed in place, he sighed and let out a laugh.

"When the gods close a door, the Nightmare Spell opens a window."

Orum turned his head in surprise, only noticing Jest now. Internally, Jest shook his head.

'Eh, Orum… I really hope we never meet as enemies. You'd never see me coming.'

They exchanged a few meaningless words, with Jest playing a drunken fool, then continued to watch the construction. Eventually, the conversation turned to the Academy.

Little Anvil… who was not so little anymore… was going to attend it. He had been infected by the Spell just before turning sixteen, and survived the First Nightmare — thank the gods. Madoc was already eighteen, and still not showing any symptoms. In one more year or so, he would be safe.

Immortal Flame's daughter was going to attend, too.

They were the future of humanity now…

Jest hoped desperately that they would be. He would gladly become the past, if only they survived.

People were calling these kids Legacies as of late.

It was a bit disgusting, that word, but not as disgusting as parents who had become enamored by the gifts of the Spell and actually hoped for their children would contract it.

Was Orum one of those bastards, by chance?

If he was… Jest thought that he might just kill him right here and

now, in this alley. There were no witnesses, and he could handle a mere Awakened in a matter of seconds. Losing one moderately competent warrior would not affect anything major, either.

'Wait… he doesn't even have children, I think? But he's taking care of his niece and nephews…'

After staring at Orum for a bit, Jest smiled coldly.

"Your sister's children are what, around ten? You must be thinking about a lot of things right now, too. Huh, Orum?"

The man nodded.

"Yeah. I am thinking… I really hope that they won't become infected. Of course, I'll need to prepare them well, in case they do."

Just like that, without even knowing it, Orum had saved his life.

Jest grinned.

"...That is why I like you, Orum. Thank the gods you're still normal, at least."

There were sane people left in the world, too.

He took another sip of the bitter brew, which had loosened his tongue. So, Jest went on a little rant.

'Legacies. Ha, what a joke!'

That was not the kind of legacy they had wanted to leave. Their children becoming Awakened was not it!

This… the city around them… that was the real legacy Warden and Jest had spent their lives building. The clean air, the stable supply of electricity, the robust infrastructure. Public trams that arrived on time, warm water in the showers, and enough food to feed everyone — even the surplus population that had to be relocated to the outskirts of the city beyond the barriers.

That was what they had wanted to leave behind for their kids, not

the bloody horror of the Nightmare Spell…

No matter the cost.

But what was the point if their children were taken away by the Nightmare Spell, anyway?

There was no point at all...

Jest let out a laugh.

"Orum, my friend, listen to this fool… abandon hope. In this era, the only thing worth believing in is the Nightmare Spell, and the Spell is a cruel bitch. Just… teach your kids well. Teach them really well, bastard."

If only Jest had taught his son better... then, maybe...

He finished his liquor and waved a hand.

"See you at the opening ceremony…"

Jest did see Orum at the opening ceremony a few days later, not that he cared too much to talk to the man.

He was more concerned about Anvil, who was supposed to enter the Dream Realm for the first time come winter solstice.

The boy had been acting strangely ever since returning from the First Nightmare…

Chapter-2161: A Flawed World

So many things had happened, and worse than that, things constantly kept happening. So, Jest was busy all the time and had not paid too much attention to young Anvil after their lessons were over.

The boy was a constant presence in his life, but more of a background character than a main one. Still, they were close — or had been, at least.

Ever since last year… Jest had distanced himself from everyone who was around the age of being infected by the Nightmare Spell. Even if it was unreasonable and cowardly, he had to in order to prevent himself from falling apart completely.

Anvil had contracted the Spell, faced the First Nightmare, and returned alive. They had seen each other once or twice since then, and even though everything seemed fine, Jest sensed that something was not quite the same.

Well, of course… it wouldn't be. The First Nightmare was a formative experience for many, and no one was the same after suffering its horrors. So, even if Anvil had changed, there was probably no hidden meaning behind it.

Perhaps Jest just felt sad about growing distant from the boy, considering that they had been close once.

He wanted to visit the kid at the newly established Academy, but this and that kept getting in the way. In the end, it wasn't long before the winter solstice that Jest finally found himself paying a visit.

He made a point of making himself presentable, and had even gone so far as to not drink anything the night before. After all, he had an image to maintain in front of the youths.

The Academy was just as impressive as he had expected. He found Anvil in the library, studying academic papers on various dead languages of the Dream Realm and the reproductions of obscure runic engravings found in different parts of the world. Jest could not really imagine what for, but vaguely remembered seeing Warden doing the same.

"Hey, kid."

When he called with a smile, Anvil looked up, studied him for a few moments, and then nodded.

"Uncle Jest."

The greeting was not really unfriendly… but it wasn't too warm, either, a far cry from how happily the boy had greeted him before, in the past. Jest hesitated for a moment, childishly hurt by that lackluster reaction.

Was it simply because they were not as close as they had been once, or was there a different reason?

Still maintaining a smile, Jest sat down and glanced at Anvil.

"Funny seeing you here. I went by the dojo first, and what would you know? Lo and behold, there was Immortal Flame's girl… ah, I'm supposed to call her Smile of Heaven now, aren't I? Bah, what a mouthful."

He grinned.

"Well, anyway. She was having a blast sparring with some guy… he's a menace with a sword, too. Weren't you two joined at the hip? How come you left her there alone?"

Anvil hesitated for a while, then shrugged.

"I don't need more sword practice."

Jest clicked his tongue and shook his head reproachfully.

"That's not what I am talking about, fool! Don't you know anything?

If you are not fast on your feet, that guy is going to steal her right from under your nose!"

That finally elicited a reaction. Anvil looked up from the inscriptions he had been studying and looked at Jest, his cold grey eyes turning a little somber.

He held his gaze for a while, then turned away once more.

"If she finds someone who cares about her, then I will wish them all the best. Smile of Heaven is a dear friend of mine, so I'd be happy for her."

Jest scowled.

No, was there seriously something wrong with the kid?

Or was he simply a clumsy fool that had no idea how to treat a girl? That would not be surprising, either.

Honestly… it was a miracle that Anvil even existed. Both of Warden's sons resembled their father, and Jest still had no idea how that guy had managed to find a woman who could endure his insufferably stiff and serious personality, let alone convince her to marry him.

In any case, this was not a good time to discuss matters of the heart, and Jest wasn't the best person to have such a conversation with a teenage kid, anyway.

There were far more important things they had to talk about.

He lingered for a moment, then asked:

"So, how do you feel? The winter solstice is drawing near."

Anvil nodded.

"I am sufficiently confident. My preparations have been thorough."

Jest sighed.

"Well, true. You are quite strong for a Sleeper, and the Aspect you

unsealed is very useful. Still, don't become complacent. Winter solstice is different from the First Nightmare — first of all, there is no guarantee that the Spell will send you anywhere near Bastion. Secondly, and most importantly, the Dream Realm is not tailored for you personally, like the Nightmare was. You might meet abominations that are simply too strong and terrible for you to face. Don't be shy and run away if you do."

Anvil studied him silently.

"I know, Uncle Jest."

He seemed strangely calm.

Jest, however, was not.

The first journey to the Dream Realm resulted in far fewer casualties than the First Nightmare — but that was only because those who were weak had already been culled by the Spell's trial. In truth, countless Sleepers still failed to return from the Dream Realm alive.

Anvil was still in danger, and Jest, having already lost one child, was terrified to lose another.

But there was nothing he could really do for the boy.

Other parents, mentors, and relatives could bestow Memories or even precious Echoes on the Sleepers before the winter solstice, but Jest couldn't even do that. Because he did not, and could not, possess any.

So, he could only try to cheer Anvil up.

Jest smiled.

"You know-it-all. Can't you just pretend to listen to my sage advice? Let me tell you something… when your old man and I were young, there weren't even any human Citadels in the Dream Realm. We still managed to conquer one, so don't even think about failing to come back. I won't forgive you if you do, you hear me?"

Anvil smiled politely.

"I guess I can make an effort, Uncle Jest. I can't go around offending the elderly, can I?"

Jest laughed.

Finally, the kid seemed like a human again.

The moment of levity did not last long, though. Soon, the smile drained from young Anvil's eyes, and he stared at his inscriptions again.

After a few moments of silence, he suddenly asked:

"Uncle Jest… can one defeat their Flaw?"

Jest's own smile froze on his lips.

'Ah. So that is the reason.'

He remained silent for a few moments, then shrugged.

"Well… sort of? But not really. A Flaw is a Flaw, so no one can ever escape it. Doesn't mean we can't live with our Flaws. It all depends on the particular one you get, but usually... most Awakened suffer quite a lot at the beginning, but then gradually learn to work around theirs."

It was not something people usually talked about, but if Anvil couldn't share his worries with Jest, then who else was there?

Jest hesitated for a moment.

"For example. Do you know what my Flaw is?"

The kid gave him a strange look.

"That… I think everyone knows, Uncle Jest."

Jest nodded, a bit disappointed.

"Well, fair. I guess it's pretty obvious — after all, people are bound to make conclusions after knowing me for years. Where else would you find an Awakened who never uses Memories? Not being able to use

Memories is a pretty bad Flaw… huh, what's with that expression?"

At some point, Anvil's eyes widened a little. Hearing the question, he hurriedly shook his head.

"No, no… you are right, Uncle Jest. That was… that was definitely my guess, as well."

Jest smiled bitterly.

These days, smiling did not come easy for him, but he was making an effort to help the boy feel calm.

"Figures. So, anyway — not being able to use Memories is a rather severe Flaw, but I've lived my entire life, won countless battles, and conquered the Second Nightmare despite it. I just had to teach myself how to rely on my cunning, skill, and strength instead. You see, kid, it is not that hard to learn how to deal with your Flaw… one way or another. However, you need to be able to do one thing to accomplish that feat."

Anvil looked at him for a while, his eyes growing strangely wistful.

"What thing?"

Jest chuckled.

"Ah, I guess it's… unconventional thinking? You need to be able to flip your perspective, and look at the problem without preconceived notions. You need to change the way you think. That way, you can find a solution even if it seems like there's none to find."

Anvil remained silent for a while, then repeated slowly:

"Change… the way I think."

Then, he did not say anything else.

Jest did not hurry him, either. However, eventually, he said cautiously:

"If you share exactly what your Flaw is… I might be able to give you

better advice."

Somewhere far away, Cassie held her breath as she experienced the vivid memory.

She was so close…

Anvil lingered for a while, then smiled.

"Perhaps I will. After I return from the Dream Realm as an Awakened."

Jest laughed.

"You cheeky brat, I told you mine! And you are just going to leave me hanging? Well… good! Don't go around revealing your Flaw. Keep it a secret."

With that, the conversation ended.

After Anvil returned from the Dream Realm as an Awakened, things happened, and more things kept happening, delaying their next private conversation.

And on the day they did find a reason to speak about Flaws again...

Jest wished that they never had.

Chapter-2162: Shield of Humanity

Almost three years had passed since the Awakened Academy welcomed its first batch of the Second Generation Sleepers.

The world had settled a little. Humanity was still besieged from all sides in the Dream Realm, but no Citadel had been overrun in quite some time. The waking world was still plagued by the Nightmare Gates, but they did not pose an existential threat to mankind anymore.

For now.

Young Anvil had become a fearsome warrior and a widely admired champion among those who defended Bastion. Together with Madoc, who had conquered the First Nightmare a year after his younger brother, the sons of Warden now led the Knights of Valor into battles against the dreadful creatures of the hungry forest.

He also collaborated with his Academy companions, Broken Sword and Smile of Heaven, often — all three had gained quite a bit of fame, becoming known as the brightest stars of the new generation.

The power and prestige of both the Valor clan and the Immortal Flame clan continued to grow. The only other clan that could compete with them was the coalition of the prominent Awakened families united by Nightwalker, the House of Night.

The culture of the Legacy clans was swiftly being cemented. In fact, Jest had even found himself as the head of a clan of his own.

Considering that he did not have a fancy True Name, he just named it Dagonet as a joke.

Sadly, no one seemed to realize that it was a joke. So, people called him Master Jest of Clan Dagonet in all seriousness now.

That was a bit of a fiasco…

His one remaining son was fifteen now.

That was why Jest did not feel at ease, even though things seemed to be going fine.

Warden remained restless, as well.

One day, while visiting Bastion after joining the retainers of his clan on a patrol of the Mirror River, Jest found him in the underground chamber deep below the castle, gazing at the great mirror that stood there, surrounded by silence as it towered above the dark hall.

There were no reflections in the mirror, of course, since it was covered by canvas.

They had discovered this underground hall decades ago, when clearing the castle from the Nightmare Creatures populating it. The mirror had not been covered back then, and so, they glimpsed the sight of the harrowing realm within.

Many members of the initial group had perished as a result, and the mirror had mostly remained covered since then. It was only when Warden became an Ascended that he dared to venture into the mirror realm once more.

Jest was not quite sure what his friend had found there, but his already formidable powers seemed to have gained a considerable boost after that.

"Oh, no. You have that look on your face."

Warden turned and smiled after noticing Jest. After spending two decades side by side, the two of them had long become so used to each other that their relationship transcended mere friendship.

One could even say that still being able to tolerate Jest after all these years was one of Warden's most amazing feats…

In any case, he raised an eyebrow.

"What expression?"

Jest sighed.

"The 'I am about to stir trouble' expression."

Warden hesitated a bit, then nodded.

"Indeed."

He remained silent for a while, then sighed and turned his back to the covered mirror.

"Let's leave this dreary place."

Soon, they were in the main keep of Bastion, looking at the maps scattered on a large round table. Some of the maps depicted the Dream Realm, but most of them, surprisingly enough, showed the familiar continents of the waking world.

Warden stared at them bleakly.

"Those dots all represent Nightmare Gates — both active and those few we closed. The red one all appeared this year. The Category can be seen from the size of the dot — Category Three Gates are larger than the Category Two Gates, naturally."

He paused for a moment, then pointed to another map.

"That one is from before the Gate Crisis. Of course, the Obel Scale did not exist yet back then, so its accuracy is not too high. And speaking of the Obel Scale, now that it operates stably, the efficiency with which we can deal with the emerging Gates has increased by magnitudes. The world is at peace… as close to at peace as it realistically can be, at least."

Jest studied the maps for a while, then asked in a somber tone:

"You're not just studying the maps from before the Gate Crisis for fun, are you?"

Warden had lost his wife during the Gate Crisis, so it was a sensitive topic.

He shook his head.

"Of course not. I am trying to determine when the first Category Four Gate will open."

Jest scowled, feeling a heavy weight settle on his heart. After a while, despite already knowing the answer, he still asked the question:

"...So, are you planning to challenge the Third Nightmare?"

Warden did not try to deny it, and just nodded calmly.

"Of course, I am."

He looked at Jest, his steely grey eyes shining with a familiar, infectious determination.

"Immortal Flame became an Ascended nine years after the descent of the Nightmare Spell. Twelve years have passed since then, and humanity is yet to take the next step. How long do you think the Spell will continue to spare us? I don't think that it's going to be long at all."

When Warden looked back at the maps, his eyes suddenly dimmed, becoming weary and bleak.

"...It's a race, after all. This world we leave in. It's all one endless race with terrible stakes, one where you can't get ahead no matter how long you stay in the lead. That is why we don't just need to conquer the Third Nightmare — we have to conquer it. We must!"

Jest remained silent for a while, feeling a storm of emotions rage in his heart.

There were a lot of things he was feeling. But mostly, he felt scared.

Eventually, he chuckled.

"Ah… I see. So that is why you and my wife have been spending so

much time together behind my back. Goodness gracious! I was this close to believing that you two are having an affair."

Warden coughed, then smiled subtly.

"What... what the hell are you talking about? An affair? Preposterous! We were merely conspiring to challenge a Nightmare while leaving you behind."

Jest clenched his fists.

Of course. Both he and his wife were members of the initial group that had conquered Bastion with Warden — two of his most loyal and powerful followers. Both of them were Masters, as well. And while Jest had played an integral role in building the world Warden had envisioned, his wife wielded a much more destructive Aspect.

So, it was not surprising that Warden would want her to be a part of his cohort once again.

It was also not surprising why he would choose to leave Jest behind, this time.

But, still.

Jest wanted to hear it from Warden's own mouth.

"Why?"

Warden sighed.

He leaned over the table, and then said quietly:

"Because you are not in the best shape? Because there is no telling how long the Third Nightmare will take, and your son is fifteen — so, at least one of his parents should be with him if the Spell calls. Because we spent so much time building this world, and I need to leave someone I trust behind to keep it all from falling apart while I am gone."

Warden paused for a while before adding:

"Because Anvil and Madoc have both grown up, but even though they are already Awakened, I still want someone to watch over them. This world is full of sharks, after all. And you are my best shark."

Jest remained silent for a long time.

There was a lot he wanted to say… a lot of bitter words that burned his tongue.

But in the end, he simply grinned.

"I think you are starting to show symptoms of dementia, old boy. I am not a shark. I am obviously a person."

Warden chuckled.

"Ha! This one… was actually funny."

Then, he froze for a moment and shook his head.

"No, wait. I actually laughed. Perhaps I am really suffering from dementia…"

Both of them laughed.

...Not long after that, Warden took a cohort of his most powerful warriors, including Jest's wife, to challenge the Third Nightmare.

However, this time, none of them had returned.

That was how the legend of Warden of Valor, the brilliant shield that protected humanity, had come to an end.

Chapter-2163: Iron Heart

It was on a rainy day two years later that Jest found young Anvil in the same underground hall, gazing at the same ominous mirror with bleak eyes.

Beyond this dark and silent chamber, the young man was the valiant knight and hero of humanity, Sir Anvil of Valor — a warrior whose bravery was beyond reproach, whose feats boggled the mind, and whose voice carried weight no matter whom he spoke to.

For all intents and purposes, he was the ruler of Bastion and the leader of perhaps the most influential Legacy Clan in the world.

But here, he was just a boy in his early twenties… a boy who was now an orphan.

There was no real proof and no bodies for them to bury, but enough time had passed so that no one could deny it anymore.

His father, Warden of Valor, was dead. He had perished while trying to conquer the Third Nightmare.

And Jest was now a widower, as well.

Ever since his wife entered the Seed of Nightmare, leaving Jest behind, all color had slowly drained from the world for him. By now, the world was mostly colorless.

There were only a few things that still seemed vibrant and vivid in its dreary expanse. One of them was his son. The other was the vermilion cloak Anvil now wore, which he had inherited from Warden.

That cloak was now like a beacon in the darkness of the underground chamber.

Jest approached the young man silently and gazed at the canvas covering the mirror. The clasps tightening it were unfastened, and a piece of the ancient frame could be seen.

He lingered for a moment, suddenly feeling uneasy.

"Have you been inside?"

Anvil nodded slowly.

"I went to explore. My father might not have mentioned it, but there are rare inscriptions left in the ruins on the other side. That was how we were able to master a bit of runic sorcery, in the beginning."

Jest frowned, wanting to say how dangerous the Other Side was. But Anvil knew. He probably knew it much better than Jest did, in fact, which was why he had gone alone without taking anyone else with him.

Jest sighed.

"You might not have heard, since you were here preparing for the wedding. But out there in the waking world, a few overly ambitious fools have hatched a little scheme and officially pronounced Warden dead. They are clamoring to depose your clan and take its place as the main seat of power. I handled them, of course… but I can't handle the side branches of your own family. Madoc's in-laws are stirring trouble, too. You need to either put them all in their places or, better yet, clean the house. Your fiancé is such a nice girl, so she deserves a peaceful honeymoon, right?"

Anvil remained silent for a while, then turned and looked at him indifferently.

The strange coldness that had first shown itself after his First Nightmare was back now, stronger than ever.

The young man studied Jest for a moment or two, then said evenly:

"Yes, I heard. That they pronounced him dead."

With that, he turned to the mirror again.

After a while, though, Anvil suddenly said:

"Uncle Jest… do you remember what you told me once? About how one should deal with their Flaw."

Jest hesitated a little, surprised by the question, then nodded.

"I talk a lot of nonsense, kid, but I do remember what I said. I stand by it."

Anvil lowered his head.

"These days, I often wonder… if my father died because of my Flaw."

Jest raised an eyebrow.

"How could he have died because of that? It's your Flaw, not his."

The young man slowly shook his head, then smiled bitterly.

"Is that so? Ah… but my Flaw, you see. Haven't I promised to tell you once?"

Anvil stared at the floor for a bit, then said quietly:

"It's that I must lose everything I cherish."

He sighed.

"I cherished my father, and now, I've lost him."

With that, he looked at Jest and smiled bitterly.

"I was too arrogant, Uncle Jest. I didn't listen to your advice at all. I tried to fight my Flaw, I tried to cheat it. But I never tried to change the way I thought about it."

The bitterness slowly drained from his smile, and the smile itself soon disappeared, too.

All that remained was cold, calm indifference.

Anvil looked away.

"I see now. The answer was quite simple. It's not that I must let the things I cherish go… it's that I should not have cherished anything, to begin with. I must not treasure anything, or anyone. That way, I would not have to lose anything, or anyone, ever again. I'll be free of my Flaw."

Turning away from the mirror, Anvil looked at Jest evenly and said in a calm tone:

"Thank you for dealing with those jackals, Uncle Jest. I will handle the branch families. I will handle Madoc's in-laws, too. My fiancé is indeed a very nice girl. And she does, indeed, deserve a peaceful honeymoon."

With that, he nodded and left the underground chamber without looking back. Before his figure disappeared in the darkness, though, Anvil paused and added in the same calm, indifferent tone:

"Oh… I heard your son has Awakened. Please accept my heartfelt congratulations. I am sure he will make you proud."

Soon, Jest was left alone in the silent hall.

He felt strangely unsettled.

After a while, he let out a heavy sigh.

"Ah, that boy. He's so serious. What am I going to do with him?"

Anvil had boldly proclaimed that he would turn himself into an unfeeling machine in order to defeat his Flaw. However, it wasn't that easy to strange your own heart — he was still a human, after all.

Jest knew for a fact that Anvil would fail miserably despite his cold determination, and many times as well.

But then again, he was Warden's son. Perhaps he would manage, somehow.

Warden was gone, and Jest's wife was gone too. But their traces remained.

Their children remained.

And Jest was the only one left to take care of them. He had promised to.

So, he was going to do anything and everything he could to not let them down.

Glancing at the canvas covering the great mirror, Jest sighed.

"Mirror, mirror on the wall..."

Then, he shivered, frowned, and silently walked away.

Chapter-2164: Nothing to Lose

Cassie froze for a moment, having finally found what she had been looking for.

"The king's Flaw…"

And what a cruel Flaw it was. No wonder he seemed cold as steel…

It was not that Anvil was incapable of feeling emotions — he had simply taught himself not to. Since he was destined to lose anything he treasured, he replaced fondness and affection with indifference, thus saving himself, and those he was close to, from having to suffer the consequences of his Flaw.

His intentions had been good… noble, even, all those years ago.

But in the end, the path he had chosen only ended up turning him into a monster, twisting and destroying everything he touched. Because once he learned to value nothing, the tethers attaching him to his humanity had come undone. And, unmoored, his cold iron heart slowly drifted further and further away from all that was good and human.

Morgan and Mordret were the most obvious victims of Anvil's inhuman detachment. But there were countless other victims, as well…

Every soldier that perished in Godgrave, every civilian sacrificed to the Chain of Nightmares while the Great Clans waged an internal war, and everyone else who had become collateral damage to Anvil's callous pursuit of what he saw as the greater good.

…Broken Sword, the Immortal Flame clan. And Nephis, as well.

The road to hell was paved with good intentions, and in this case, the

hell itself had been forged by a single decision made by a determined young man.

It would have been heartbreaking, really, if it wasn't so hideous and appalling.

Just as Cassie thought that, the lumbering figure of Jest suddenly leaned forward, and his lips stretched into a ferocious grin, revealing his monstrous teeth.

But he had not broken free of her gaze… at least not just yet.

Cassie did not have a lot of time left, though. Luckily, she had already gotten what she wanted.

So, Cassie considered ending things there to prevent further danger…

But just then, another constellation of memories attracted her attention.

It was so vivid and vibrant, but at the same time strangely unsettling. Like something that Jest desperately wanted to forget, but was unable to.

Cassie paused, suddenly feeling intrigued. At this point, she had seen most of his formative memories. The descent of the Nightmare Spell, meeting Warden, the birth of his children, the death of his son, the loss of his wife and his best friend…

What else was there?

His Third Nightmare?

Even knowing better, she still couldn't resist and burned more essence to delve into the vibrant, unsettling memory.

It was strange, but the constellation of vivid memories had nothing to do with how Jest had become a Saint. Instead, it mostly took place in Bastion…

It had happened only a couple years after that fateful conversation in the Great Mirror hall.

Cassie frowned as she rushed through the kaleidoscope of foreign experiences, feeling her hold on Jest's mind become more and more tenuous.

***

Just as Anvil had promised, he put an end to the internal struggle in Bastion. Jest would have solved the problem by simply eradicating all the parasites — or at least some of them, to teach the rest a lesson. But the young heir of Valor went about consolidating his power in a less bloody, but arguably more ruthless way.

There were ways to break people without making them bleed, and he did not spare the members of his extended family at all. His coldness and decisiveness even made Jest feel a little chilly.

The boy had grown up and become a man… a frightening man, at that. Perhaps that was the only way that children born in the era of the Nightmare Spell could grow up.

'He is like… a colder, scarier version of Warden.'

Jest was a little concerned, and a little proud.

In the aftermath, the world continued to spin. The race Warden had mentioned went on, and with each month, humanity continued to lose some of the lead it had gained in the past.

Anvil cemented his position in Bastion, but although the power and prestige of Valor still meant a lot, the influence of his family was in decline. It was not easy for a young Awakened to contend against old monsters of the First Generation, especially since many of them were Masters now.

Many had perished the same way Warden had, though, and continued to lose their lives in the desperate pursuit of Transcendence. It was as though the great culling of the days before Immortal Flame conquered the Seed of Nightmare was transpiring once again, erasing more and more familiar faces from existence.

Every time Jest looked, someone else was gone.

In any case, for these reasons — and many others — Anvil was determined to challenge the Second Nightmare as soon as possible.

His preparations were swift, but thorough. He barely slept, spending all his time either training, forging, or studying the secrets of runic sorcery — Broken Sword might have been the deadliest warrior of their cohort, but it was Anvil who was responsible for equipping his companions with the best Memories and gear an Awakened could dream of.

He also frequently visited the forbidden realm hidden in the eerie mirror under Bastion, somehow managing to return alive each time. Every time Anvil returned from these perilous journeys, he would lock himself up in either the library or the forge, sometimes remaining there for weeks.

As time passed, he seemed to acquire a few odd quirks, too. It was not even the measured coldness and nonchalance he always displayed after that bitter conversation with Jest, but other, stranger things…

For example, one day, Anvil ordered to destroy every mirror in Bastion, and punished those who failed to comply with the order severely. He also seemed to have become an obsessive perfectionist, as if harboring a deep hatred of the very concept of Flaws.

But Jest wasn't too concerned. Everyone who was worth anything in this world was a little bit eccentric… he himself was known to have a strange habit or two. Like dressing too dashingly or never holding back his elevated, highly outstanding sense of humor.

As the date when Broken Sword and his cohort were planning to challenge the Second Nightmare approached, Anvil directed his attention to recruiting exceptional talents to join them.

Broken Sword, Smile of Heaven, and Anvil were already three of the most distinguished Awakened of their generation — or maybe even of all time. Not just anyone could stand side by side with them, however, he did manage to find two.

One was that girl from the western reaches of the Dream Realm, Ki Song...

It was also at that time that he brought a kid named Asterion to Bastion.

By then, Jest was well on his way to fifty, and a Master as well.

But still… the moment he saw that teenage boy, he somehow felt a strong and chilling sense of unease.

Chapter-2165: Dreamspawn

"I don't get it. I just don't… what are you thinking?"

Jest was dismayed.

The kid, Asterion, had seemed strange from the very beginning. The mere fact that Anvil, who was turning twenty-three soon, would recruit a youth who did not look older than sixteen to accompany him into the Nightmare made no sense.

Given his age, Asterion could not have Awakened years ago, and would therefore have no experience. Unknown, inexperienced, untested… someone like that should not have become a member of any cohort attempting to challenge the Second Nightmare, let alone one consisting of warriors of Anvil's caliber.

More than that, the kid simply gave Jest the creeps. He was perfectly pleasant and friendly, spending most of his time wandering the Citadel with a curious look on his face, but there was something about Asterion that seemed slightly… off.

As if he was not quite human, but merely a thing wearing human skin.

No one else seemed to notice, but Jest did. And so, he pressed Anvil for an explanation, even though that was not how they usually talked.

"Where did you find that guy? Who is he? Why do you want to take him into the Nightmare?"

Anvil simply stared at him indifferently, not showing any emotions.

Eventually, he shrugged.

"Since when do I need to justify my decisions to you, Ascended Jest?"

Jest let out a bewildered scoff.

"Wow. Ascended Jest, really?"

Anvil stared at him some more, then sighed.

"I want to take him into the Nightmare because he is worth it. As for the rest…"

When Jest heard the brief explanation, he did not know what to think, or how to feel.

It was a strange thing, to learn that an old enemy you had thought was gone forever suddenly appeared out of nowhere, alive and well.

"Path of Ascension? Those lunatics, really?"

The zealots of the Path of Ascension had disappeared decades ago… no, to be precise, they had disappeared around sixteen years ago, soon after Immortal Flame conquered the Second Nightmare.

Jest knew about their twisted beliefs, albeit not in detail. If he remembered correctly, they saw the Dream Realm as some sort of Promised Land, and the Spell as a divine guide meant to lead humanity — or at least a few chosen ones — out of the dying world where they had been born to find salvation.

Or some such nonsense.

As far as all the cults that had sprouted after the Nightmare Spell's descent went, this one was not the most malignant. The zealots of the Path of Ascension mostly kept to themselves, maintaining peace with the mainstream factions as long as they were left alone.

If there was one thing that separated them from the crowd, it was that the core of their cult consisted of genuine powerhouses — those who stood out among the Awakened of the First Generation, no different from people like Warden or Nightwalker. It was why Warden had often felt regretful about not being able to bring them into the fold due to how strange and extreme their views were.

In the end, however, the Path of Ascension cult had become a ghost on the pages of history, just like all the other cults. The men and women comprising it had just disappeared one day, never to be seen again.

To think that those lunatics had actually managed to establish a colony in the Dream Realm. Not only that, but they had even raised a child here…

"Lunatics!"

They were all dead now, though… according to Asterion, at least — the very child who had been born and raised in the Dream Realm by the powerful zealots, and the only survivor of the first human colony established in its wild expanse.

"How did that even work?"

Had Asterion been infected by the Nightmare Spell here? Did he undergo the First Nightmare? What about the winter solstice, what happened to him when he was supposed to fall asleep and be sent to a random spot in the Dream Realm?

Anvil shook his head.

"Nothing happened to him on the winter solstice. He conquered the First Nightmare just like anyone else would, then Awakened immediately after anchoring his soul to a Citadel. In any case, you don't need to worry about Asterion. He might have come from a fringe cult, but he is not a zealot himself. In fact, unlike his parents and guardians, he is quite interested in the waking world. Granted… some of the notions he has and views he holds are a bit strange. What else would you expect, considering his upbringing? But what really matters is the power he holds."

He looked at Jest somberly.

"Unlike what you think, that young man is not inexperienced. He has more knowledge and experience than any of us, in fact, having spent his whole life in the Dream Realm. His Aspect is also exceedingly formidable. He will be useful to me in the Nightmare — no one else

can compare."

Jest remained silent for a while, then shook his head.

"How do you know that you can trust him? Need I remind you that your companions can be just as dangerous as the phantoms of the Spell in the Nightmare? There are many Masters out there who experienced strife and betrayal after entering the Seed… and that's just those who have nothing to hide and talk about their trials freely. Those who keep silent could very well have been the betrayers."

Anvil shook his head again.

"You don't have to worry about that. Asterion and I have a deal — and he is very particular about deals. So, he won't betray me."

Jest frowned.

"What kind of deal?"

Anvil glanced at him coldly.

"I will help him find a way to enter the waking world if he helps me become a Master. Nothing more, nothing less. So, are we done here, or do you want to interrogate me some more?"

Jest remained silent for a while, feeling unhappy, then waved a hand.

"Well, whatever. Do what you want. I'll keep an eye on him while he's here in Bastion, though… deal or not, that kid is dangerous. I can feel it."

Anvil chuckled, surprising Jest — these days, it was rare to see the young man displaying emotions.

He nodded.

"Indeed. I know he is dangerous. That is why I need him..."

Chapter-2166: The Returned

Eventually, the five Awakened — Broken Sword, Smile of Heaven, Ki Song, Asterion, and Anvil of Valor — had left to challenge the Second Nightmare.

Jest would be lying if he said that he wasn't worried. But, at the same time, he was strangely not too worried.

That was because he knew each of them well… except for the kid, Asterion, of course. If those five could not conquer the Nightmare, then no one could.

Jest was quite busy in the meantime, himself. Now that the young lord of Bastion was gone, Madoc had temporarily assumed control over Clan Valor, and although his loyalty to Anvil was not in question, he still needed help to keep the other Legacy Clans in check.

Anvil's young wife, Gwyn, also needed support and protection. So, Jest — a powerful Ascended whose mere presence could solve many problems — had left Rivergate in the hands of his son and temporarily relocated to Bastion.

Things went smoothly at first…

But then, three months after Anvil had entered the Seed, Jest woke up from the sound of furtive footsteps approaching his bedchamber.

He looked at the door coldly and grasped the hilt of the dagger that lay beneath his pillow. Then, however, he relaxed after hearing a quiet knock… his hearing was sharp enough to recognize who it was knocking on his door late at night, anyway.

Letting out a quiet sigh, Jest got up, put on a robe, and went to the door.

There, young Lady Gwyn was standing, pale as a ghost and wearing an enchanted nightgown. The dim light of a lantern Memory illuminated her youthful figure and lovely features.

Jest coughed.

"Ah… Lady Gwyn… it's not that I don't appreciate the thought, but I'm afraid I must decline…"

The young woman looked at him in confusion, prompting Jest to sigh.

"Indeed! I am quite dashing. However, I am old enough to be your father, and your husband is almost like a son to me! Something like that... would be highly inappropriate..."

Her eyes widened.

"W—what… I am not…"

Jest laughed.

"Bah! It's a joke, a joke, girl! What happened?"

Alas, Anvil's wife seemed to lack a sense of humor, too.

After staring at him for a few moments, she took a deep breath and said in a small voice:

"It's… it's Vale. He's back."

Vale was a nickname that Smile of Heaven had given Anvil when they were kids. It had stuck to him ever since, so…

'Wait. He's back?!'

Jest studied the girl's face somberly, then asked in a low voice:

"You don't seem too excited, Lady Gwyn."

She shook her head slowly.

"Something… something seems to be wrong. He doesn't have any

wounds, but he's… something is wrong, Master Jest! M—madoc… Madoc told me to bring you."

Jest's expression darkened.

He remained silent for a few moments, then asked:

"Who else knows?"

If there was something wrong with Anvil… his thoughts raced. They would have to prevent the news from leaking out before anything else.

The girl took a shaky breath, trying to calm herself.

"It's just me, Madoc… and two Awakened guards who were keeping watch over the Gateway."

Jest nodded.

The guards were retainers of Clan Valor, Squires who hoped to become Knights some day. They were loyal, but human loyalty was often fleeting. He did not know whether they would need to be silenced, yet, or merely contained for a while. In any case, Madoc was wise to call him.

"If you would give me a moment to put some clothes on."

Unlike the young and pretty Lady Gwyn, Jest was too old to walk around in his pajamas.

Soon, they quietly arrived into the throne room of Bastion, where the Gateway was located. It was the throne that stood on a tall dais, with two enormous pillars rising from behind it… the pillars were almost identical to the frame of the Great Mirror that was located deep underground, directly below the throne room.

Whether it was a coincidence or not, Jest did not know.

The two Squires were keeping watch at the door, while inside, Madoc was standing in front of the dais. A familiar figure was sitting on the steps leading up to the throne, wrapped in the cloak that Madoc had

taken off.

Beneath it, Anvil seemed to be naked.

When Jest and young Gwyn approached, he looked up and stared at them with cloudy, hollow eyes.

There was no will or intelligence in those eyes, just a deep and eerie nothingness… as though Anvil was not quite awake, but merely sleepwalking.

Jest saw his own pale reflection in those glassy eyes, and felt his heart skipping a beat.

'No, no… what happened? Nothing was supposed to happen!'

A familiar, dark sense of futility raised its ugly head in his heart again, but before he was overwhelmed by a panic, some semblance of life suddenly returned to Anvil's eyes.

The young man smiled warmly.

"Uncle Jest…"

Jest had grown so accustomed to only ever seeing cold indifference in Anvil's eyes that this sudden burst of genuine warmth left him stunned. It was just like how the boy had smiled at him as a child.

The sight of Anvil smiling brightly was so out of place that Jest even considered if Immortal Flame's daughter, Smile of Heaven, had stolen his body.

The girl's Dormant Ability allowed her soul to wander freely, exploring the world as a bright spirit. She could also occupy and animate objects… as far as Jest knew, Smile of Heaven had never displaced someone's soul to take over their body, but that did not mean that she couldn't.

However, a moment later, his crazy suspicion disappeared.

That was because Anvil raised a hand, causing Jest's dagger to float from its sheath and land on his palm. After studying it for a moment,

the young man frowned.

"...Imperfect."

Even if someone had taken control of Anvil's body, they wouldn't be able to use his Aspect.

And neither would they display the same loathing of flawed things.

Anvil was indeed back.

But… why was he in this strange state?

And where were the other members of his cohort? Broken Sword, Smile of Heaven, Ki Song?

Asterion?

Jest glanced at Madoc, and they both frowned.

Something… was indeed wrong.

Chapter-2167: C2-167

Anvil was fine, at least physically.

However, his entire personality seemed to have changed — or have regressed, at least. He seemed not quite there, yet. He didn't look dazed or confused, but rather… blank.

As if the very thing that made him who he was had been if not erased, then at least lost.

At the same time, from time to time, he displayed glimpses of his usual self — enough so to convince Jest, Madoc, and young lady Gwyn that he was truly and unmistakably Anvil of Valor, the ruler of Bastion.

It was because of the small, subtle details that only those who knew him well would recognize. The small peculiarities of his speech, the rigid set of his shoulders, the way he smiled in a reserved, but confident manner — it was all perfectly familiar, even in this strange and concerning state.

There were more and more of these glimpses with each minute, as well, as if Anvil was slowly remembering his previous self. That gave them hope that he would recover eventually.

For how, however…

The most disturbing change was how warm and soft Anvil seemed, stripped of his impenetrable armor of cold indifference. For Jest and Madoc, it was as if he had reverted to his personality from before becoming a carrier of the Nightmare Spell. For Gwyn, who had only ever known him as an Awakened, it was an entirely new side of her usually stern and aloof husband.

But… there was also something subtle and eerie about Anvil now.

Jest couldn't quite put his finger on what it was, but he felt strangely uneasy in his presence.

Well, of course he did. The clan leader of Valor, one of the most powerful men in the world, was currently no different from a child.

Warden had once told Jest that the world was full of sharks, and Anvil being in this uncanny state was no different from spilling blood into the water. All of them would not miss a chance to rip out a chunk of flesh if news about his condition spread.

Whatever the hell his condition was.

They would have to figure that out later. First, Jest needed to contain the spread of information.

As if that was even possible!

The mere idea of keeping Anvil's return under wraps made his head hurt. There were so many things to consider…

Jest suppressed a groan and looked at Anvil once again.

The boy was smiling while Gwyn was kneeling in front of him, saying something softly.

Shaking his head, Jest looked at Madoc.

"We will need to move fast. But also cautiously."

Luckily, Warden's older son was no fool. In fact, he was a remarkable young man in his own right — an exceptional talent, even. It was just that his excellence was always outshined by Anvil's monstrous talent.

In any case, he was someone Jest could rely on to handle things… but not all things, and especially not those that demanded a delicate approach.

For example, while there were only two Squires who had witnessed Anvil's strange state here in Bastion, there was no saying what was currently happening in the waking world. He should have awoken in his sleeping pod in Valor's compound in NQSC, after all, before using

his new ability to enter the Dream Realm of his own volition to come to Bastion.

His sleeping pod was now empty, and many people would have been alerted that the clan leader had disappeared. Someone had to make sure that none of them talked, either — in theory, Madoc was the perfect candidate to do just that, since his own sleeping pod was mere dozens of meters away.

But it was not that simple.

Because Anvil had not challenged the Nightmare alone.

His companions would have returned, too… or would have perished inside the Seed. If it was the latter, then their bodies had already turned into corpses by now — in the best case. Alternatively, they could have become Hollow.

So, someone had to negotiate with the Immortal Flame clan. There was also the Song clan, which could not compare to the family of Broken Sword and Smile of Heaven, but was only more unpredictable as a result. Luckily, Asterion was an orphan of a destroyed cult… he was borrowing a sleeping pod in the compound of Clan Valor, so at least that was not a concern.

There were other forces in play, too.

The situation was unknown and unpredictable, so Madoc would not be able to handle everything on his own.

Jest sighed, the gears of his mind spinning.

Eventually, he looked at Madoc.

"You stay here and make sure that no one… and I mean no one… in Bastion learns of what happened yet. Also, make sure that those who did learn do not speak about it."

Madoc glanced in the direction of where the two Squires stood behind the door, then nodded. Those two would keep their lives if they were loyal and smart, or die if they weren't.

Next, Jest looked at Gwyn and hesitated for a few moments.

He still felt a little uneasy.

Eventually, though, he spoke:

"My lady, please take care of Anvil until I return. Hide him in your quarters and stay with him… don't let anyone else enter. This is a sensitive situation, and we must protect him until we know more about what happened."

The young woman looked at him, then nodded hesitantly.

Jest rubbed his eyes.

"...I'll return to the waking world and handle matters there. It should not take me more than a day or two. I'll return with the news."

With that, he looked at Anvil one last time and smiled.

"And you. Be sure to get better by the time I'm back, brat. Don't make me worry."

Jest lingered for a few moments, then grimaced and walked toward the dais. Putting his hand on one of the steps leading up to the throne, he activated the Gateway.

…A few moments later, Jest found himself in the foyer of the Dagonet estate in NQSC. He sighed, looked around, then entered a security code and accessed the elevator.

Descending deep underground, he briefly checked on his son — the boy was resting peacefully in the sleeping pod — and then proceeded to the security center of the estate.

There, he activated a few precautionary measures and dialed a certain number on his communicator.

Considering that it was the dead of night, it took the person on the other end of the call a while to pick up.

Eventually, though, an unpleasant voice resounded from the

communicator:

"I swear to the dead gods, Jest… if this is some kind of prank…"

Jest forced out a smile.

"No, no. How have you been, Ruin?"

Master Wake of Ruin — another remnant of the First Generation and the pillar of the government — ground his teeth. The two of them were not exactly on friendly terms, but they knew each other well, having worked together on establishing the current world order.

"Apart from being woken up in the middle of the night? I'm fine. What do you want?"

Jest had about a dozen jokes ready to fly out of his mouth, but he held himself back.

He needed Ruin's help.

Since Anvil was back, the Seed of Nightmare was conquered. Which meant that the corresponding Nightmare Gate would have closed in the waking world.

The government monitored all known Gates, so that was another point from where the information could leak — and the largest one, at that.

So, Jest just said neutrally:

"I need a favor. Gate C2-167 should have closed earlier today. I want you to keep that fact hidden for a while."

There was silence on the other side of the call.

Jest waited for a while.

"Hello? Did you hear me?"

Eventually, Wake of Ruin answered.

His response, however, was not at all what Jest had expected.

His old colleague said angrily:

"What the hell are you talking about? Bastard, are you drunk again?"

While Jest was considering what to say, confused by the intense reaction, Wake of Ruin added:

"Gate C2-167 is wide open! It has never closed. Do you think I would have been sleeping if it did?"

Chapter-2168: Sense of Alarm

A bit later, Jest finished the call and put his communicator down, then stared at the wall with a dazed expression.

Wake of Ruin was not mistaken. Very few people knew which Seed of Nightmare Broken Sword and his cohort had challenged, not to mention which Gate was connected to it — this was the kind of information Legacy Clans usually kept to themselves.

But Wake of Ruin was one of the pillars of the government, so he knew. That was why he had been secretly monitoring Gate C2-167, knowing that any change in its condition — or lack thereof, after a certain time — would have an effect on the entire world, one way or another.

Because of who had challenged that Nightmare.

So, he would have known if the Gate suddenly closed. Jest was not satisfied with just that, though, so he forced the man to check right there and then — Wake of Ruin could gain access to the telemetry of the Obel Scale faster than he could, so it only took ten minutes.

There was no doubt. The Gate was still open.

Which meant…

Jest had no idea what that meant. It did not make any sense.

Had the Nightmare not been conquered? Had its Seed not been destroyed despite the Nightmare being conquered? Was Anvil's strange state somehow connected to that anomaly?

How was Anvil back?

Jest raised a hand and rubbed his temple.

"What the hell is happening?"

He hesitated for a while, then dialed another number.

He had to be discreet about the questions he asked and the people he talked to, so it took some time, but eventually, it became clear that neither the Immortal Flame clan nor the Song clan were showing any unusual movements.

Which meant that nothing had happened to Broken Sword, Smile of Heaven, or Ki Song. They had neither awoken nor perished.

Short of contacting Immortal Flame himself, Jest was not going to get a more concrete confirmation.

Which… he could do, theoretically.

However, there was an easier way to gain clarity.

Frowning, Jest left the underground portion of the Dagonet estate and proceeded to the garage. Soon, he was driving a luxurious PTV across the streets of NQSC, struggling to keep himself from speeding recklessly.

The subtle sense of unease he had been feeling in Bastion had grown stronger, turning into alarm.

'What is going on?'

What was it?

He should have been celebrating and drinking expensive wine now that Anvil had returned unscathed, but instead, he was feeling like something terrible happened.

Was happening.

Like he had made a mistake.

It seemed like the world itself was against him. His communicator made a grating sound as Jest was driving, announcing that a Nightmare Gate would soon open nearby. As a result, the streets

ahead turned impassable due to the evacuation procedures. Government vehicles blocked the roads, and he had to take a long detour to arrive at his destination.

Which was Clan Valor's compound.

Jest used to live relatively close to their headquarters in NQSC, but after losing his son, his family moved away. So, it had taken him quite some time to reach the heart of the city. By the time his PTV stopped in front of the heavily defended gates, it was already early morning.

Gaining entry inside the compound, however, was relatively quick. Soon, he was already walking to the main building.

"Master Jest! You are visiting us at a peculiar time. May I be of assistance?"

He stared at the butler, Sebastian — one of Warden's original followers, just like Jest himself was. He, too, had been left behind when Warden challenged the Third Nightmare.

It was fortunate to meet him instead of a member of the extended Valor family. Jest trusted the guy much more than he did those people.

His suspicions were already confirmed by how nonchalant the butler looked, and how peaceful the compound seemed.

But he still needed to check.

Jest leaned forward a little.

"Sebastian… take me to see the young lord."

The butler studied him silently.

Awakened were exceedingly vulnerable while they slept, so the sleeping pods of Legacies were guarded with extreme caution. Jest was one of the most loyal subjects of Valor… but he was also a notorious killer.

If he chose to betray the family of his late friend and benefactor, giving him access to Anvil's sleeping pod would be a fatal mistake.

Nevertheless, the butler nodded eventually.

"Follow me."

The two of them proceeded past several security checks, descending deep underground. The vault of Clan Dagonet was quite formidable, but it could not even compare to the security measures of the Valor compound. Jest doubted that even a Titan could break through these defenses easily.

Then again, the hungry forest that had been besieging Bastion for two and a half decades could even destroy the ancient Citadel if not for the efforts of its defenders. So, a real Titan would probably crack this shell of enchanted alloy in a matter of days, if not hours.

Eventually, they reached the most heavily defended floor. Here, the sleeping pods of the direct descendants of the Valor clan — Anvil and Madoc — were located.

Even their wives slept on a different floor when visiting the Dream Realm.

However, at the moment, there was a third occupant here. The kid, Asterion, was taking up one of the rooms.

The butler entered several security codes to proceed into the depths of the fortified level. They also had to stay in place while undergoing several scans, both mundane and magical.

In the end, however, Jest finally found himself in front of a heavy steel door.

It opened slowly, and he walked inside.

There, an iron sarcophagus stood on a low platform, shimmering in the darkness. It was Anvil's sleeping pod — one he had entered before setting out to conquer the Nightmare.

Jest felt his heart beating rapidly as he approached the sarcophagus

and looked through the narrow window on its lid.

Then, he took a shaky breath.

The sleeping pod… was not empty.

Anvil was laying inside, sleeping peacefully.

He was right there.

Jest staggered back, deeply stunned.

'What… what the…'

Everything, including his own two eyes, was pointing to the fact that Broken Sword's cohort was still in the depths of the Nightmare.

Anvil was still in the Nightmare, as well.

And if he was there…

Then who the hell was currently in Bastion?

Jest suddenly felt cold sweat rolling down his back.

Who was in Bastion...

Or what was?

Chapter-2169: The Anomaly

Jest did not know what to do.

A person like him, who had survived the end of the world and lived long enough to see a new one emerge from the ruins, could usually maintain composure no matter the circumstances.

All kinds of unexplainable things were possible now that the Nightmare Spell ruled the world, and Jest had experienced more than a fair share of bizarre encounters. He had braved the wild reaches of the Dream Realm and the mournful desolation of the waking world, spending decades fighting harrowing monsters — humans and Nightmare Creatures alike.

And yet, at that moment, he felt utterly lost.

'It doesn't make any sense…'

Hiding his shock, he accessed a special panel on the sleeping pod and studied Anvil's vital signs. Everything seemed to be in order — he was perfectly healthy. His body was, at least.

His soul, though, was not inside its mortal vessel at the moment. It was somewhere far away, in the depths of a Nightmare…

It was supposed to be.

Could it be that the boy had somehow escaped the Seed without conquering it? When Awakened slept, their souls traveled to the Dream Realm, where they were manifested as spiritual bodies. In the process of Ascension, the physical and the spiritual bodies fused, making one a Master.

Jest assumed that Anvil had conquered the Second Nightmare and Ascended. If he had not, however, then his physical and spiritual

bodies would still be separated.

The physical body was right here.

The spiritual body… would appear near the Gateway where his soul was anchored.

Which was the throne room of Bastion.

Jest covered his face with a hand for a moment.

Was the man they had found there really Anvil?

Or was it an impostor?

He was unsure. And uneasy.

He was afraid.

Taking a deep breath, Jest turned to the butler and said hoarsely:

"Sebastian… gather the Knights and station them here. Tell them to be ready for battle."

The butler raised an eyebrow.

"Are you expecting an attack?"

Jest wanted to shake his head, but stopped himself. Eventually, he shrugged with a sigh.

"I don't know yet. You have to keep it quiet, though. The less people know, the better."

He hesitated for a moment, and added:

"This concerns the safety of the main family."

Sebastian inhaled sharply, then nodded.

With that, Jest left a tether near the sleeping pod, then reached into his soul and pulled on his anchor, traveling back to the Dream Realm.

The throne room was empty. Time in Bastion was somewhat similar to that in NQSC, so it was early dawn. The first rays of sunlight were already pouring through the tall windows, which meant that the Gateway would have visitors soon.

Few Awakened stayed in the Dream Realm for prolonged periods of time, preferring to return to the waking world as soon as they could. The main keep was locked at night, which meant that those who needed to use the Gateway would start arriving before too long.

There was a noise from just beyond the door. Jest pursed his lips, then walked there with silent steps.

Madoc was kneeling in front of the gates, using a rag and a bucket of water to wash the stone floor. It was a rare sight, to see a prince of Valor performing such a mundane chore with his own two hands — so much so that Jest was taken aback for a moment.

But then, noticing drops of blood on the stone plates, he understood the situation. It seemed that at least one of the squires had proven to be unreliable, and due to the need for secrecy, Madoc could not very well summon a servant to clean up the resulting mess. It seemed like both of them had had a busy night.

The grim nature of it all made Jest want to tell a joke.

He swallowed a laugh.

Madoc looked at him from below with no amusement whatsoever in his eyes.

"Uncle Jest… you are back. What news do you bring?"

Jest hesitated for a moment.

'How do I even explain it?'

He knew the main keep of Bastion like his own backyard, but at the moment, the twilight of its silent halls felt eerie and ominous.

…Come to think of it, Jest did not know his backyard too well. He had never bothered to spend much time there after purchasing the

current estate of the Dagonet clan.

He gritted his teeth.

"We need to find Gwyn soon. She… might be in danger. Come, hurry. I'll explain on the way."

Madoc's expression changed, and he pushed the bucket of bloody water away. By the time he stood up, he was already summoning a combat Memory.

The two made their way to Anvil's chambers both quietly and hastily. It was at a moment like this that Jest cursed how grand and labyrinthine Bastion was… with every step he took, his unease and alarm continued to grow.

He was the one who had sent Gwyn away with the… whoever or whatever it was that had appeared in the throne room of Bastion in the middle of the night. Everything that was going to happen from this point on, or had already happened, would be his responsibility.

So, he mentally prepared himself for the worst.

But, to his surprise…

When they finally arrived at the chambers Gwyn and Anvil shared, the situation inside was perfectly peaceful.

Anvil, now properly clothed, was sitting at a table and studying the plates of food in front of him curiously. Young Gwyn looked a little tired, but otherwise fine, pouring him a cup of fragrant tea.

She seemed relieved, even, a tentative smile illuminating her face when she looked at her husband… who she thought had finally returned from the Nightmare alive.

When they entered, both Anvil and Gwyn turned to look at them.

Jest froze.

Suddenly, he realized that he had actually hoped that there would be horror and carnage by the time he came back.

Because then, he would at least know what to do.

He knew how to fight and kill best, after all.

Standing by his side, Madoc tensed and asked quietly:

"Should we… attack?"

They could try to kill the anomaly. That was the safest choice.

But what if it was Anvil, after all, brought back from the Nightmare by some strange whim of the Spell? Wouldn't Madoc be killing his own brother, and wouldn't Jest be killing his friend's son?

Death was something that could not be taken back.

If it wasn't Anvil, though…

Could they even kill whatever it was that had taken his form? Or would they just be provoking something so sinister and terrible that none of them stood a chance against its malice?

Jest remained silent for a few moments, wishing for nothing more than to let loose and answer with a brilliant joke, like he usually did.

In the end, however, he simply shook his head.

"Let's take him to the waking world."

Chapter-2170: Two Princes

Jest was facing a dilemma, and one that did not have an obvious answer.

He did not know whether the young man in front of him was truly Anvil of Valor. He could not risk killing him before finding out the truth, either…

And there was no sure way to find the truth.

So, he could only try his best in the absence of a reliable solution.

The only reasonable theory Jest had at the moment was that Anvil was somehow expelled from the Seed without conquering the Nightmare. So, he was still an Awakened. His physical and spiritual bodies had not yet fused as a result — one was in the waking world, and one was here in Bastion.

Therefore…

If the young man was indeed Anvil, bringing him back to the waking world would result in the physical body awakening inside the sleeping pod. That would prove his identity.

If Anvil's physical body remained asleep… that would give them more information, too.

It was not a great plan, but it was at least something.

So, that was what they did.

After telling Gwyn the truth, they hurried to bring Anvil back to the throne room, arriving there just before the first Awakened started to enter the main keep. The young man did not resist — he showed a cold and disdainful expression when being ordered to follow, but

responded well to being cajoled by Gwyn.

That was in line with how Anvil would have behaved in his usual state. None of them had the right to order him around, after all, but he would usually easily agree to their requests.

The young man… the thing… was eerily similar to Anvil that Jest knew. It was to the point that he had to keep reminding himself that there was a possibility that the person he was looking at could turn out to be an impostor.

Was there even an impostor in the world who could act out the very essence of another person so faithfully?

It was unlikely. And yet, Jest could not shake off the subtle sense of discomfort — repulsion, even — he felt near this supposed Anvil. Madoc and Gwyn did not seem to feel the same fear, but they also did not possess instincts as sharp as his.

'Damn it… I don't know.'

Jest departed first, using the tether he had left in the compound of Clan Valor to return to the underground chamber. There, he was instantly surrounded by the Knights of Valor.

There was no telling what would happen next, and if it would even transpire near Anvil's sleeping pod. But it was better to be safe than sorry.

A few moments passed in tense silence. Jest stared at Anvil's sleeping form, waiting — praying — that he would open his eyes.

But instead, a minute or two later, it was Madoc who broke the silence, arriving from his own sleeping chamber in a hurry.

The older of Warden's sons looked at the sleeping pod. Then, his eyes widened.

"Gwyn and… and the other… they left before me."

Cursing, Jest rushed out of the room.

'Damn Valor brats! Who asked them to keep the sleeping pods of their wives on another floor?! The heartless bastards!'

Granted, this compound had been built back when both Madoc and Anvil were still little kids… but still!

There was apparently space here for that creepy kid, Asterion, so why not Gwyn?!

It took him a few minutes more to arrive at the floor where the sleeping pods of the immediate family were located. Just when Jest was leaving the elevator, he heard a strange noise coming from behind the armored door leading to Gwyn's sleeping chamber.

Instead of waiting for someone to enter the code, he simply tore through the reinforced alloy with bare hands and dashed inside.

Gwyn was standing in the corner, having just left the sleeping pod.

And in front of it…

Was Anvil, dressed just like he had been in the Dream Realm. Which did not make any sense, since only Ascended could carry physical items on them between the two worlds.

Hearing the deafening noise of an alloy door being torn apart, the young man turned around and looked at Jest.

Then, he raised his eyebrow.

"Uncle Jest… why are you breaking down the door to my wife's sleeping chamber?"

The young man stared at him for a few moments…

And smiled.

The smile was bright and friendly, but for some reason, it made Jest shudder.

For once in his lifetime, he had no comeback at all.

***

Things had gotten… strange, after that.

Somehow, there were two Anvil's in existence.

One was sleeping in an iron sarcophagus deep below the manor of Clan Valor.

The other was up and about, albeit seemingly suffering from severe amnesia.

No one really knew how that had come to be, and who — or what — the second Anvil was. His existence could not be disclosed, either, and so, the young man was locked on one of the underground floors of the estate.

He was made comfortable there, of course… but he was still no different from a prisoner. Imprisoning the head of the Valor family was an act of treason, but considering how strange and uncanny the entire situation was, it seemed like they had no other choice.

Jest, Madoc, and Gwyn took turns taking care of the second Anvil — at first, they were on guard against him, but after a few days passed, their vigilance gradually lessened. The young man acted a bit odd, but was generally agreeable and easy to deal with, as long as they treated him nicely.

If anything, he was much more pleasant and easygoing than the original Anvil had been… charming, even.

So, everything was somewhat fine, on that front.

At the same time, trouble was brewing in the Valor clan, where many saw the sudden situation as an opportunity for a power grab.

A few strange and frightening events had transpired in Bastion and in the compound of Clan Valor in NQSC, as well, and as a result, Jest and Madoc were suddenly extremely busy dealing with both problems.

While the situation on the underground level where the anomaly was

kept remained calm and peaceful, the atmosphere in the manor itself had become tense and eerie.

Jest felt like he was slowly losing control.

That tension only continued to rise for a week or two…

Until, one day, everything changed.

That was because, on that day, Nightmare Gate C2-167 suddenly disappeared, and Anvil of Valor — the original one — slowly opened his eyes inside the sleeping pod.

Chapter-2171: The Return of the King

Although the Valor compound seemed the same on the surface — apart from the retainers and mundane workers employed by the clan being strangely subdued and on edge — the situation underground was different.

The level where Anvil… the anomaly… was kept remained quiet and peaceful. Very few people were allowed access there, and usually, it was just young Lady Gwyn and a few loyal Knights keeping guard.

However, the levels above and below the temporary containment floor were different.

There, dozens of Knights were gathered, waiting for something to happen in tense anticipation. Not all of them even knew what it was that they were here for, since the existence of the anomaly was still being kept secret. They had just been told to be prepared for anything.

Pulling so many powerful warriors away from their duties was stretching the resources of Clan Valor thin, but there was nothing Jest or Madoc could do about it.

Currently, Madoc was in Bastion, holding down the fort.

Jest was here, dealing with the powerful figures of the human world.

Even though he had done everything in his power to prevent the news from leaking, it was impossible to stop it completely. Therefore, there were strange rumors going around the Legacy clans about the Valor family. Most people just treated these rumors as idle entertainment, but those who held actual influence were stirring.

After all, there was no smoke without fire.

So, Jest had spent the entire day talking to old acquaintances and lying through his teeth.

Everything was fine.

Nothing had happened.

There would not be a new ruler in Bastion.

Things were under control.

…But things were definitely not under control. In fact, things were getting more and more out of control. Both here and in Bastion, eerie and unexplainable events kept happening, and while no one had perished, it was only a matter of time.

Because in the world of the Nightmare Spell, sinister signs always led to disaster.

Jest was not naive enough to expect anything less.

'Ah… I'm regretting getting rid of all those cults now. It feels like we need an exorcist…'

He was currently in a small room under the Valor compound, reclining in an office chair tiredly. The video walls were turned off, plunging the room into darkness. The only source of light were the screens in front of him, which bathed him in pale light.

One of the screens displayed the security feed from the level where Gwyn was watching over the anomaly. Currently, she was reading him a book — the young man seemed quite content, listening to her voice curiously. If one did not know the truth, they would have looked like a happy married couple.

On the second screen, the reports and papers that Clan Valor had quietly commissioned from various researchers and specialists were displayed. Jest had been reading through them slowly, trying to find some sort of explanation for the current situation.

Sadly, they were proving to be useless, for now — he had learned about all kinds of Aspects that could create an illusion of a person, Nightmare Creatures that could mimic human behavior, and mysterious locations where bizarre occurrences had been documented to happen for naught.

The anomaly had passed every test they had come up with based on this research. The new Anvil was not an impostor using a rare Aspect to fool them, a Nightmare Creature, or a Dream Realm phantom. For all intents and purposes, the young man was Anvil of Valor in the flesh.

…The third screen displayed the Obel Scale telemetry, as well as the reading from Anvil's sleeping pod.

Jest rubbed his eyes tiredly, and then turned back to the research papers. The human domain in the Dream Realm was relatively small at the moment… but far north, beyond the impregnable mountain chain serving as the boundary of the eastern human enclaves, an even more fearsome mountain range was rumored to be located.

According to reports, those mountains were perpetually shrouded in mist, and that mist displayed strange and terrifying properties…

As Jest read the exploration paper, written by some audacious guy named Julius, something suddenly attracted his attention. Turning his head, he looked at the feed from the containment level… and flinched.

The anomaly was still listening to Gwyn, but he had shifted his gaze and was looking directly at the hidden camera now.

Almost as if looking directly into Jest's eyes.

A subtle smile twisted the young man's lips, making Jest shiver for no reason.

'What…'

In the next moment, the sound of alarm resounded from the speakers. Jerking his head in the opposite direction, he stared at the third screen, where an urgent notification was displayed.

It took Jest a few moments to realize its meaning. He leaned forward.

"It's gone!"

Nightmare Gate C2-167 had just disappeared. Since he had set up the system to notify him immediately if its condition changed, he was probably the first person in the world to learn of that fact.

There was some lag to the Obel Scale, but it must have happened minutes ago at most.

While Jest was digesting the startling piece of news, there was another alarm. His eyes moved, and then widened.

Anvil's vital signs were going crazy.

'Crap!'

Flying out of the chair, Jest rushed outside.

By the time he reached Anvil's sleeping chamber, there was an audible boom, and its heavy armored door suddenly folded like paper. The metal walls groaned and bent inward.

Jumping over the deformed alloy, Jest entered the room and looked around wildly.

It looked like a violent implosion had happened inside. The armored walls had broken, revealing the framework of the compound beyond. The iron sarcophagus had turned into a small jagged sphere of torn metal. The lights were blinking chaotically.

In the middle of it all, Anvil was standing like an unnecessary tall sculpture. He was naked, his flawless build and chiseled muscles revealed in all their glory. His dark hair had grown long, and was sticking to his handsome face in wet strands.

His calm, steely grey eyes were peering at Jest steadily.

Even as a Master, Jest suddenly felt oppressed by the weight of that gaze.

'He… he definitely Ascended…'

As a whirlwind of scarlet sparks surrounded Anvil's naked figure, forming into a set of knightly armor, he raised an eyebrow and asked in an even tone:

"...Are you going to continue staring?"

Chapter-2172: Descent

Jest blinked.

The voice was cold and indifferent… as it was supposed to be. But after spending some time in the company of the warm and friendly anomaly, it sounded a bit jarring.

And strangely comforting.

He hesitated.

"C—congratulations on conquering the Nightmare, Ascended Anvil."

Anvil nodded matter-of-factly, then looked around and pursed his lips, as if evaluating the cost of repairs needed to restore the sleeping chamber. A moment later, he looked into the distance — most likely reading the Spell's runes.

Then, he turned back to Jest.

"Thank you. But what are you doing here?"

Jest felt his mouth suddenly turning dry.

"Well… about that. Actually, we have been dealing with a bit of a situation here."

Anvil frowned slightly.

"What kind of situation?"

Jest coughed.

"That, uh… nothing too serious?"

He thought for a moment, and then said:

"It's just that while you were gone, we've replaced you with a doppelgänger. He's nicer and easier to get along with. Your wife is with him right now!"

Anvil stared at him for a moment, then rolled his eyes.

"Is this really a good time for your jokes, Uncle Jest?"

Jest remained silent for a moment, then sighed.

"Boy… I wish it was a joke. But there really is a copy of you, who just popped up in Bastion one day without any warning. I don't know how to explain it, but he is being held here, just a few floors below, at the moment."

Anvil looked at him silently.

Then, his expression slowly changed.

Jest had not expected him to laugh at his awkward joke — gods knew the boy was just like his father, having no sense of humor whatsoever — but what he really did not expect was to see fear bloom on Anvil's face.

Terror, even.

It was so strange that Jest was stunned.

He did not think that he had ever seen Anvil show fear, not even as a child. And especially not after encasing his heart in the cold armor of indifference.

While Jest was paralyzed by shock, the young man asked in a hoarse voice, his usual nonchalance completely gone:

"A copy… of me… appeared in Bastion?"

Jest nodded.

"Yes. He was found in the throne room. Uh… stark naked and in a strange mental state…"

Anvil's took a step back.

"H—how... how long ago? Has anyone seen it… has anyone talked to it? How many people? Who?"

Jest lingered for a moment, the old sense of alarm slowly turning into panic in his heart.

'Did I… did I make a mistake?'

He forced himself to answer:

"About… two weeks ago? A couple of Squires and a few Knights. It was mostly me and Madoc watching over him. Oh, and Gwyn, obviously."

Anvil's eyes suddenly widened.

"Gwyn!"

Before Jest could say anything else, the chamber suddenly came undone.

That was the only way he could describe it — the floor opened like a flower, the thick plates of reinforced alloy tearing with a deafening screech. Shards of concrete and sparks from torn cables flew to all sides, and at the same time, the blinking lights were extinguished completely.

Anvil jumped into the churning pit of torn metal without wasting a single moment. No, he did not jump — rather, he flew, accelerating his movements by pushing the steel plates of his armor.

'Since when can he...'

The whole compound shook as a cacophony of noise rolled across the underground tunnels.

'D—damn!'

Jest came to his senses and dove into the pit to follow Anvil.

Even though he had only wasted a single moment, he was already far behind.

The floor of the sleeping chamber had been utterly destroyed, as if it had been made of paper. The room below it was in ruins, too, entire meters of reinforced alloy pierced and bent out of the way in a split second. The same for the floor below that.

It was as if a cataclysmic disaster had transpired in the depths of the Valor compound.

Jest fell for a couple of seconds before finally landing on something that was intact. He was now on the level where the anomaly was being kept, and immediately rushed toward the living quarters.

He saw the obliterated door and the Knights who were picking themselves off the floor with dazed expressions. Just before he could cross the threshold, though, a powerful shockwave rolled from inside, throwing him back.

Jest flew through the air and collided with a wall, leaving a deep dent in it. A mundane human would have been turned into bloody goo by the force of the impact… as a Master, he was somewhat unscathed.

But it hurt like hell.

The Knights were alive, but unconscious.

Ignoring the pain, Jest picked himself up and lunged back toward the containment cell.

The compound quaked once more, and there was another shockwave. But this time, he was prepared for it — lowering his torso and turning it slightly, Jest cut the shockwave with his shoulder and finally entered the devastated living quarters.

It was too dark to see, since all the lights had been destroyed, and the only source of illumination was one of Gwyn's Memory lanterns.

Taking a step forward, Jest fell.

'Argh, damn it, why does he have to keep destroying the floor?!'

The entire set of rooms assigned to be the anomaly's living quarters were gone. The few floors below were completely wrecked, as well. Judging by the magnitude of destruction… the thing he had brought to Anvil's home was chillingly powerful.

After bouncing off a few jagged pieces of torn alloy, Jest hit the ground. This time, it was not the metal floor… instead, it was cold, wet soil. They were on the lowest level of the compound now, its outer walls seemingly obliterated.

Rolling, Jest jump to his feet and stood up.

There was a scene of devastation around him, with plates of bent alloy and unrecognizable debris piling in the darkness. Some of it was on fire, filling the remains of the lowest floor with dim light.

Just when he regained his bearing and looked around, searching for Anvil…

He heard a strange sound.

It should have been drowned out by the noise, but somehow, Jest heard it clearly.

A melodious, bright ringing of breaking glass.

It was only then that the sense of unease that had been tormenting him for the past two weeks finally disappeared, and he involuntarily let out a relieved sigh.

Chapter-2173: Paper Armor

The battle between Anvil and his flawless copy, despite decimating the underbelly of the Valor compound, had not lasted long.

At least Jest wanted to believe that it was over.

Signs of chilling destruction surrounded him from all sides, but there were no deafening booms ravaging his ears anymore. There were no crushing shockwaves, and the world wasn't quaking. The dim darkness was illuminated by the spreading flames, and clouds of dust obscured the world like a veil.

In such moments, Jest cursed his inability to use Memories. It would have been nice to be able to see clearly in this mess.

'...Has the boy become that powerful, then?'

Jest had battled plenty of Fallen Nightmare Creatures, and a few Masters as well. Ascended were indeed inhumanly strong, but not quite at the level of what Anvil had displayed immediately after coming back from the Nightmare.

Was that the power of those with divine blood in their veins?

Jest carefully moved through the carnage, searching for Anvil. He found him soon enough, kneeling in the dust with a pale face.

The young man was… in bad shape. His intricate armor was nearly destroyed, and blood was pouring from a dozen hideous wounds on his body. One of his arms was hanging limply, sharp fragments of bone protruding from the mess of torn muscles, and even his face was not spared.

He was covered in blood.

However, his eyes remained calm and eerily cold.

'What a terrible way to return from the Nightmare…'

A shattered sword was collapsing into a whirlwind of sparks in Anvil's hand.

Hearing Jest approach, he shifted and looked up.

Jest had a thousand questions on his mind, but meeting the young man's gaze, he faltered.

For a moment, he even doubted whom he was looking at… was it really Anvil?

Or was it the anomaly?

Which one of them had won?

'The… the other one… wasn't wearing armor.'

As if reading his mind, the young man said evenly:

"It's me."

Anvil opened his mouth, as if wishing to say something more, but at that moment, his mask of indifference finally cracked.

His expression changed, and he suddenly took a shaky, frightened breath.

"Gwyn…"

Ignoring his wounds, Anvil jumped to his feet and looked around, as if in panic.

They found Gwyn a minute later, buried in rubble and unconscious… but, luckily, alive.

Hugging her, Anvil let out a shaky breath.

"Thank the gods… thank the gods… thank…"

And looking at him, Jest realized something that should have been obvious, but had eluded him until now.

It was that Anvil's armor of indifference, which had seemed impenetrable, was merely a facade.

In truth, it was merely a flimsy disguise made of paper.

…At least it had been, then.

But things never stay the same.

The anomaly was destroyed, and all the problems caused by its existence were resolved. The authority of Clan Valor was not only mended, but grew explosively now that the young lord of Valor had become a Master.

The clan compound in NQSC was repaired. The wounds received by Anvil, Gwyn, and the knights caught in the battle healed. The Great Mirror hiding under Bastion was wrapped in canvas once more, and the forces of the clan started to develop countermeasures against the visitors from the other side.

There was happy news, too.

Not long after Anvil returned from the Nightmare, young lady Gwyn was announced to be pregnant. Before the end of the year, they welcomed a new heir — an infant boy who would inherit Bastion, the Mirror Lake, and all the glory of the Valor clan one day. He was named Mordret.

It was then that things started going wrong.

Because when Anvil looked at his son, Jest noticed no warmth whatsoever in his cold grey eyes.

It was not just his usual air of indifference. There was more to it… an eerie suspicion that no one else shared.

A suspicion that young Mordret was not his son at all.

A suspicion like that was nothing short of crazy. Considering the

situation, nothing could have happened between Gwyn and the anomaly, no matter how convincing the other Anvil had been. Jest was sure of it.

Nothing had happened, and yet… a worm of doubt found its way into Anvil's heart. And once it did, doubt seemed to slowly devour him from the inside.

Anvil became only colder and more unapproachable after his son was born. But there was still some humanity left of him, at least.

These last drops of humanity did not last, though.

Whatever warmth was left in his heart disappeared on the day Lady Gwyn passed away after giving birth to their second child, Morgan.

On the day of the funeral, Jest found Anvil in the underground hall once more, looking at the canvas shrouding the Great Mirror.

The young man turned and looked at Jest with no emotions in his steely eyes.

A few moments later, Anvil said evenly:

"...I failed again."

He remained silent for a bit, then turned back to the mirror and added without any emotion in his cold voice:

"But I won't fail anymore."

Jest wanted to say that the boy was learning all the wrong lessons. But he wasn't sure that he had that right… most of all, he wasn't even sure that the boy was wrong.

The Nightmare Spell was a cruel god.

People said that time healed all wounds…

But in the world of the Nightmare Spell, time only dealt you new ones.

Jest's tentative hope that Anvil would eventually recover from losing Gwyn was shattered two years later, when disaster struck and a Category Five Gate swallowed America.

So many things were lost in that calamity.

Among those things were the lives of Immortal Flame and Smile of Heaven, who fell while buying civilians time to evacuate.

And losing Smile of Heaven was the final straw that made something snap inside Anvil.

That was what pushed his cold iron heart to make an unforgivable decision.

For the good of humanity, for himself… and for the glory of the Valor clan, as well.

…Of course, that decision would not have been possible without the damn abomination, Asterion, waiting there with a smile on his lips after offering the lord of Valor a new deal.

A deal to help Anvil kill Broken Sword.

Chapter-2174: Fatal Curiosity

Cassie froze, momentarily shaken by what she had discovered.

It had not been her goal…

But now that she had caught a glimpse of the conspiracy that would shape the fate of the world — as well as destroy Neph's life and turn her into who she was today — she could not just let go.

Even if it was the wisest choice.

Her reserves of essence were dwindling, and Jest was already showing signs of freeing himself from the bewitching vice of her gaze.

She still had to handle the aftermath, as well. Killing the old Saint would not prove too difficult… but as much as he deserved to be killed, that was not necessarily the best choice.

Cassie's Aspect gave her a rare ability to understand her enemies. Understanding someone usually made it impossible to hate them… after all, how could she truly hate someone whose joys and sorrows she had experienced herself? Understanding could only give birth to compassion, and it was easy to lose herself in the memories of others.

Just like that, she could not help but empathize with Jest, who had experienced so much, and had suffered so much sorrow throughout his long and extraordinary life.

However… memories were also deceitful.

They were not truthful records of what had happened. They were vague and fleeting, often showing only a fragmented account of the past. Even then, they were shaped and painted by the mind of the one who remembered.

Take Jest, for example. In his mind, he was a loyal and sympathetic person… perhaps not virtuous, but definitely well-meaning. That was why what he remembered of his life told a tale of beautiful human connections and dire adversity in pursuit of greater good.

But in reality, he was a butcher whose hands were drenched in blood to the elbow. A callous killer who disregarded human life and had left countless innocent victims in his wake… it was just that he did not care about them that much, and therefore, the faceless victims did not even leave a lasting trace in his memories.

Cassie felt compassion toward Jest, but she was also revolted by him… not that her own hands were clean, of course.

Both of them deserved to die, perhaps. So it was a question of profit.

Killing Jest would be profitable, since it would remove a powerful enemy from the board. However, it would also result in a loss, since his death would undoubtedly push Anvil to take action and reveal Cassie's hand.

As a result, she hesitated to kill him.

There were other ways to deal with the old man, as well.

She could alter his memories slightly, manipulating them to achieve her goals. With some effort, she could erase some of them instead, making him forget ever wanting to kill her.

She could even burn away all his memories one after another, erasing them until his mind became a clean slate, and the man named Jest became swallowed by oblivion while his body and soul remained alive.

That was within her power, too.

But all of it required vast amounts of essence to be spent. Only killing Jest did not demand any additional cost.

Still, still…

Could she really let the chance to learn about Broken Sword's death

go?

Cassie hesitated for a few moments, then made a decision and delved back into Jest's memories.

And not long after that…

Her eyes widened slightly.

'...Weaver? That was the reason?'

She did not have time to finish the thought, though.

Because at that moment, Jest's monstrous hand shot forward.

He had been struggling desperately and biding his time while the audacious girl sifted through his mind. It felt vile and ghastly, to feel someone invading your mind forcefully and carelessly perusing your most hidden feelings, most cherished memories… shedding light on your deepest scars.

What right did she have?! What gave her the courage?!

Even enthralled by Song of the Fallen's bewitching gaze, Jest was shaking with shame, indignation, and fury.

But he was an old monster who had outlived more than his fair share of needlessly confident youngsters.

He knew how to be patient.

And just like Jest had thought…

Cassia had succumbed to greed.

She overstayed her welcome.

When he finally moved, she seemed caught by surprise. The young woman reeled back, her eyes opening wide, but it was already too late.

They were too close to each other.

His clawed fingers closed around her slender, fragile neck.

Jest grinned.

"...Curiosity killed the cat, you know?"

Of course, he wasn't foolish enough to give her time to answer.

Just as the words left his mouth, Jest strained his muscles and snapped the young woman's neck.

She was a Saint, of course, but her Aspect did not augment her physique. Jest, however, was currently in his Transcendent form.

Her spine broke easily enough.

As the hideous Echo behind him collapsed into a maelstrom of sparks, he threw Song of the Fallen away. Her broken body landed on a very special patch of scarlet moss and submerged into it slowly, the wide-open eyes still staring at him with a silent accusation.

Was she still alive? Well, probably… it would take some time for a Saint to die from a broken neck.

Her body would dissolve in the pit of digestive fluid hidden beneath the moss soon enough, though. A grisly death, no doubt — quite fitting for a girl who did not know her place.

There would be no trace left, leaving him free to come up with an explanation.

'So what if you learned all my secrets? Take them to your grave, foolish girl.'

Now, then… there was one more left.

Dealing with Helie turned out to be almost boring. Her Flaw made her a perfect victim for someone like Jest, after all — denied the power of her Aspect, she died powerlessly in his hands.

She did not stop struggling until the very end, though.

That, at least, was a bit fun.

In the end, he tossed her body into the same pit.

Looking around, Jest let out a deep sigh.

"Ah. I feel like he'll reprimand me very sternly, this time…"

Even he was a little afraid of Anvil's wrath.

And Anvil would definitely be very angry about what Jest had done today… well, at least as angry as his cold iron heart allowed him to be.

Assuming his human form, Jest went about getting dressed. His clothes were designed in a way that prevented them from being destroyed when he Transformed — his shirt and trousers were, at least. All he had to do to restore them to their previous shape was fasten a few buckles.

The jacket, unfortunately, was completely gone. He clicked his tongue.

"Damn it! I just had this one tailored…"

Shaking his head, Jest picked up his cane, looked around one last time, and left.

***

Not long after that, Helie walked out from behind a tree and looked at Cassie, who was standing nearby, with a strange expression.

"...That's it? He just left?"

Cassie nodded tiredly.

"Why would he stay? I implanted a false memory into his mind. One of killing us brutally and disposing of our bodies. So, he has nothing left to do here."

She had erased the memory of what her eyes truly looked like when

she transformed, as well — like she always did after using her Transcendent Ability.

Helie remained silent for a few moments, then shivered.

"Can you put your blindfold back on? I'm, uh… will feel better if you do."

Cassie did not comment and simply pulled the blindfold back into its place. Helie seemed to relax once she did.

That was the very reason she wore a blindfold, to begin with.

Eventually, Helie asked:

"So… I guess we are dead now? At least as far as Clan Valor will be concerned. What do we do now?"

Cassie turned to her, remained silent for a moment, and then smiled softly.

"Well, what else?"

With that, she faced the jungle.

"We'll have to defect to Song, I guess."

Chapter-2175: Blind Faith

After having a short discussion, Cassie and Helie were ready to set out. There was no reason to linger, anyway — the decision had been made, and there was no going back.

Helie was concerned for the clan, but at the moment, the best way she could protect them was to play dead for a while.

The abominable jungle rustled eerily around the two of them, making Cassie's skin crawl. She shivered and placed her hand on the hilt of the Quiet Dancer, trying to find comfort in its familiar texture.

Altering Jest's memories had burned most of her remaining essence… in fact, she had been forced to cut the connection to most of her marks while delving into his past to preserve some, and as a result, she was truly and utterly blind at the moment.

She could not even activate her Awakened Ability — or rather, she could, but only for a short while. Which meant that it was better not to use her Aspect unless there was an emergency.

Both she and Helie were beaten and battered, still reeling from the fierce violence of the battle and utterly exhausted. Nevertheless, Cassie spoke after hesitating for a few moments:

"Saint Helie… I'm afraid I am running quite low on soul essence. So, while my Echo will be of some help, I will have to rely on you to get us out of this appalling jungle."

She could not see what expression the beautiful Saint made, but it somehow felt like someone was giving her a dubious look.

In the end, Helie coughed.

"Sure, no problem. Luckily, I wasted very little essence myself — that

old goat prevented me from using my Aspect throughout most of the battle, after all. And I am sure that your Echo will be very helpful, as well."

She paused for a moment, and then added in a slightly stifled tone:

"...Where did this creepy Echo come from, anyway? What kind of vile, ghastly Nightmare Creature did you kill to get it, Lady Cassia?"

Cassie tilted her head a little, then answered honestly:

"Oh… it is an Echo of myself."

Helie seemed to have lost the ability to speak for a few moments.

Then, she asked in a small voice:

"W—what?"

Cassie shrugged.

"Well… certain events transpired in my Third Nightmare, and as a result, I had to kill a Corrupted version of myself. I happened to receive an Echo, as well."

Helie took a deep breath, trying to gather her thoughts. Then, she looked back to the delicate young woman standing motionlessly in front of her.

'Right. Of course. Why not? Sounds perfectly reasonable!'

...Not!

"And you just keep an Echo of yourself around?"

Song of the Fallen nodded elegantly.

"I do."

Then, her expression changed slightly, and she added hastily:

"Of a Corrupted version of myself. Hence the tentacles… please don't misunderstand, Saint Helie! I absolutely do not have those myself.

After all, I am not some eldritch horror wearing human skin. I am most definitely a perfectly normal human woman."

Helie stared at her for a bit, then forced out an unconvincing chuckle.

"Sure… sure, of course! If you say so."

It was funny — she was old enough to be Cassia's mother… no, maybe a cool aunt… but, somehow, it did not feel that way. If anything, the exquisitely beautiful young woman gave her the opposite feeling.

Shaking her head, Helie called upon the power of her Aspect and assumed her Transcendent form. Then, she offered Song of the Fallen her hand.

"I don't say this often, but… please climb onto my back, Lady Cassia. I'll give you a smooth ride."

Saying that, she grinned.

The young woman hesitantly raised her hand, grasped Helie's own, and mounted gracefully.

"Hold tight!"

Summoning her bow, Helie delved into the jungle at a swift trot. Both of them had to remain alert due to all the dangers that the Hollows hid — however, they had a good chance of emerging to the surface alive.

Cassie had never ridden a centaur before, let alone such a friendly one, so she did not know what to expect. However, the journey turned out to be far more comfortable than she had thought it would be.

At some point, she spoke:

"Saint Helie… I will need your help once we arrive at the Song encampment, as well."

Helie turned her head a little, looking back.

"How so?"

Cassie hesitated for a moment.

"You were not involved in what your uncle had done, but you are still his niece. Master Orum sacrificed his life for the Song clan. He had a personal relationship with the Queen, as well… so, there is a good chance that she will receive you well. I, on the other hand, will be met with hostility and suspicion. So, you will have to try and smooth things over."

Helie let out a wistful sigh.

"I can try, I guess. But…"

She paused.

"But what happens next?"

They had discussed the consequences of seeking shelter in the Song camp already, but really, the end result of their actions remained ambiguous — especially for Helie, who knew neither what Nephis was planning nor what had truly pushed Cassie to take this step.

From the outside, it simply looked as if they were trying to betray the Sword Domain and switch sides in order to support the Song Army. Of course, the Sword Domain had betrayed them first — but that was not a clean justification. Reality was never so simple.

Even if Jest had attempted to kill them, and even if the King himself could not be trusted, both Cassie and Helie were tied to the Sword Domain. Cassie would have to fight against Nephis and the Fire Keepers if she joined the Song Army, while Helie would have to fight against her own clan… it was all a proper mess.

In the end, Cassie just sighed.

"Things will resolve themselves, somehow."

Helie chuckled.

"Ah… that's good, then. If that is the case, I'm relieved."

That answer was as good as any other would have been. Helie had already decided to put her faith in Nephis, after all… she had refused Jest's offer in hopes that Changing Star would make things work, somehow.

Now, the only choice she had was to follow that hope.

After a few minutes of silence, Helie suddenly spoke in a somber tone:

"Well, then, I have something to confess."

Cassie raised an eyebrow, surprised.

"...Confess?"

Helie did not say anything else for a full minute, then sighed.

"This whole damn war started based on the excuse of punishing Clan Song for sending assassins after Changing Star, didn't it? Well, actually…"

She paused for a moment.

"It was me."

Cassie tilted her head.

"What do you mean?"

Helie let out a joyless chuckle.

"Look! It seems there's something that even Song of the Fallen doesn't know. But, yes… there were no Song assassins, and neither Dar of the Maharana clan nor Silent Stalker had anything to do with the attempt on Changing Star's life. They're not the only Saints who know their way around a bow, you know? It was me. I shot those arrows."

She raised her great bow, which had grown in size to fit her Transcendent form.

Helie sighed, and her shoulders fell.

"Well, it wasn't like I had any choice. When Morgan of Valor comes calling, you don't say no. I was ordered to make it seem like I wanted to kill Lady Nephis, and so, I did. I thought I should mention it before we reach the stronghold of Clan Song."

Cassie remained silent for a while, stunned.

That… she had really had no idea. They had suspected that Clan Valor — perhaps even Morgan herself — was behind the assassination, of course.

But their suspicion had never once fallen on Saint Helie.

…And there Cassie was, priding herself on being unassuming and knowing things.

'Huh.'

But how did it make any sense, for Master Orum to have been a Song spy while his niece was Valor's secret weapon? Their Legacy clan was not even really on the map, in the grand scheme of things... especially not compared to the deeply impactful role they seemed to have played in the Great War.

Life was full of irony sometimes.

Eventually, Cassie shook her head and said with a bit of dejection in her voice:

"Saint Helie… respectfully, please don't mention this particular part when negotiating with Clan Song. Some things… are better left unsaid!"

Helie responded with a quiet laugh.

"Alright. I think I can keep my mouth shut, if you insist."

By then, they were almost halfway to the fissure leading to the surface of the First Rib.

And Cassie had already replenished a little essence — enough of it, at least, to maintain a connection to one of her marks.

She could have restored her connection to Helie, but instead, she softly touched the mark left on Sunny — his original body that remained near Nephis.

[Sunny?]

He seemed to be drinking tea in the beautiful gazebo on the Ivory Island. Hearing Cassie's call, he lowered his tea cup.

[Cassie? Where are you? I was trying to reach you earlier…]

She hesitated for a moment.

[Sorry. I was out of essence — in fact, I can't maintain this connection for long even now. So, please, listen carefully. I need to tell you something important.]

He prepared to listen, raising his cup and taking a sip of the fragrant tea.

Cassie took a deep breath.

[So, the thing is... I am dead...]

Sunny spat out his tea.

[...officially, I mean.]

Chapter-2176: Precipice of the End

After Cassie ran out of essence and their conversation was interrupted, Sunny remained motionless, staring into the distance with a lost expression on his face.

After a while, he looked down at his cup.

"...My tea has turned cold."

His voice was even.

With a sigh, he brought the cup to his lips and took a leisurely sip, enjoying the darkly beautiful view of Godgrave and the vibrant, idyllic tranquility of the Ivory Island with a smile.

Cassie's news was unexpected enough, but the momentary feeling of being lost Sunny had experienced was not because of it. Rather, it was because of what the news signified.

The resolution of this dreadful, appalling war had been drawing near for a while...

But now, it was here.

The end had arrived.

So, this was probably the last moment of peace he would get to experience until everything was over… quite possibly the last moment of peace he would get to experience for the rest of his life, since his life could very well end in a matter of days.

Still, if he thought about…

Sunny felt satisfied.

It was far too soon, true. And they did not quite manage to accomplish everything they had set out to accomplish before the war started… but they did their best.

From the day Sunny had chosen to return from the frigid ruins of LO49, out there in the northernmost reaches of the Dream Realm, and until today, he had never once stopped working doggedly toward his bold and defiant goal. His determination to vanquish the Sovereigns, subjugate the world, and bend existence to his will had never wavered.

So, he was ready.

He was ready to win… but he was prepared to lose, too. After all, despite it all, the treacherous scheme he and Nephis had woven was at its core a gamble.

The future was unclear... who knew what the future held?

Sunny certainly did not.

But whatever happened, he would have no regrets.

At least that was what he told himself while enjoying his tea in peace.

Eventually, the bottom of the cup revealed itself, and he put it down with a hint of regret. Letting out a long sigh, Sunny rose from his seat and left the gazebo.

There were a lot of things he had to do.

'This girl… I think I've been a bad influence on her.'

Sunny had felt something strange while talking to Cassie. It was as if he had found himself on the wrong end of a conversation with himself!

No, but really. What sane person opened a conversation by announcing their death?

As Sunny walked across the emerald grass, his eyes turned chilly with

murderous cold.

'...Jest.'

So the affable old man had decided to show initiative and kill Cassie after luring her into the woods. Cassie had left him alive… but Sunny was not that forgiving.

He was in the mood to tear the bastard limb from limb, feed his corpse to the Nightmare Creatures, and eradicate his entire clan.

It took quite a lot of composure not to send the Lord of Shadows to intercept Jest and end him like the vermin he was before the old man reached Vanishing Lake.

That vile piece of trash had dared to set his sights on Cassie?

Sunny gritted his teeth in anger.

'Calm... calm down.'

Cassie knew what she was doing. If she had thought that she would be in serious danger, she would have asked him for help. But she did not, which meant that she had known about Jest's intentions in advance and felt confident that she could deal with him herself.

And she had.

Not only had Cassie defeated the old Saint — Sunny should not have expected anything less from her — but she also learned quite a lot of secrets from his memories.

For example, Anvil's Flaw.

Exhaling slowly, Sunny smothered his anger and began to think.

Jest could keep drawing breath for a bit longer.

'That Flaw… is a harsh one.'

Sadly, it was not something one could use against the King of Swords in a battle. It gave context to the decisions Anvil made and provided

deep insight into his character, explaining a lot both about his rise to power and about his downfall as a human being. Knowing your enemy was a great advantage, and Sunny was glad to have gained the knowledge of Anvil's Flaw…

But it was not exactly a fatal vulnerability he had hoped to find.

The same went for Ki Song. Although Cassie had not glimpsed the secret of her Flaw directly, both of them strongly suspected that the Queen's Flaw made her incapable of bearing children. Therefore, her vulnerability was the affection she felt for her adopted daughters.

Anvil's lack of familiar love could be exploited, and Ki Song's love for her daughters could be exploited, as well.

But not in the narrow timeframe they were left with, most likely... at least not effectively.

That whole endeavor had led them to a dead end.

Sunny sighed.

'Well, when have things ever been easy?'

Most of the time, things were as hard as they could get. So, he had never really expected to find an easy way to defeat the Sovereigns.

They had gained plenty of useful knowledge about the past, regardless. New information about Asterion and Mordret, among other things — two people who would become big problems in the future, without a doubt.

If there even was a future for Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie.

Entering the Ivory Tower, Sunny frowned.

There was something else that Cassie had learned, but chose not to tell him — she did mention it briefly, but did not go into details. It was partially because they had been pressed for time, and partially because she seemed to want to gather her thoughts before sharing this new information.

The secret had something to do with Broken Sword and the downfall of the Immortal Flame clan… no wonder Cassie was reluctant to speak on this topic rashly. It was probably the very reason why she had contacted Sunny instead of speaking directly to Nephis, unwilling to have that conversation with her yet.

The information did not seem immediately relevant to the conclusion of the war, regardless.

And there were too many things they had to do before the end came — especially because Cassie could very well become unable to contact any of her allies soon.

Who knew what kind of restrictions Song Clan would put on her once she was in their hands?

This was why Sunny had to hurry.

'I really hope Nightmare has finished his task well…'

Chapter-2177: Dire Choice

Far away, near the ruined Citadel at Vanishing Lake, the Lord of Shadows was observing the troops coldly. The soldiers were getting ready for the final stage of the clandestine assault — some were leaving to clear the last stretch of the path to the surface, others were preparing to receive the additional forces from the siege camp.

The attack on the Lesser Crossing would most likely happen in a matter of days… actually, now that Jest had gone and made a mess, the plan would most likely be accelerated.

The Lesser Crossing would fall, and the Song Army would retreat to the edges of the Collarbone Plain. The territory of the Song Domain in Godgrave would dwindle, and the territory of the Sword Domain would spread, enveloping it from all sides.

Ki Song would be faced with an uncomfortable choice. She would have to either abandon the main camp of her army and retreat to the sole Citadel in Godgrave that was under her control, abandon the Citadel to make her last stand at the fortified camp, or split her forces to try and protect both.

The disadvantage of splitting her forces was obvious enough. Abandoning the Citadel would only diminish her power further, while at the same time giving Anvil an opportunity to expand his. The main camp of the Song Army seemed like the least painful sacrifice… but only at first glance.

The main camp was not only the logistical hub where all the supply chains came together, but also the gateway to the Song Domain. If it was abandoned, nothing would prevent Anvil from simply descending from Godgrave into the western reaches of the Dream Realm and wreaking havoc in the basin of the River of Tears, where most of Ki Song's Citadels were located.

So, Sunny thought that she would most likely concentrate her forces in the main camp.

After the Two Crossings fell, the camp would be surrounded in a day or two.

And once it was surrounded, the Sovereigns would clash directly. Ki Song would have no other choice but to enter the fray herself, driven into the corner as she was.

…And at that time, Sunny and Nephis would have to enter the fray, as well, finally facing the Sovereigns in battle.

Of course, ideally, that would only happen once both Anvil and Ki Song had exhausted each other's powers, dealt each other countless wounds, and one of them was on the verge of being killed.

Sunny's face grew somber behind Weaver's Mask.

'...But would Nephis be willing to go through with it?'

Neither of them had attained Supremacy yet, after all.

Of course, there was a good chance that at least one of them would become Supreme during or in the aftermath of the battle. Freeing themselves from the clutches of the Sovereigns, who held the entire world in an iron grip, and slaying them was one hell of an act of defiance, after all.

Usurping the throne of humanity — or, in Sunny's case, putting the person he had chosen on it — was, as well.

But if the Sovereigns fell and no new Supreme emerged, the result would be catastrophic. Because nothing would protect the mundane inhabitants of the Dream Realm from becoming carriers of the Nightmare Spell.

Hundreds of millions of people in both Domains would probably die, plunged into the depths of their First Nightmares.

…But then again, a comparable amount of new Awakened would emerge.

Dozens of millions of Awakened — imagining such a tremendous force was frightening.

But not as frightening as the cost humanity would have to pay to come into possession of such force.

Sunny was horrified by the mere thought of having to make this choice.

Of course, missing their chance to defeat the Sovereigns would not really save any of those people, either. If either the King of Swords or the Queen of Worms vanquished their adversary and became the sole ruler of the world, their already astonishing power would become simply inconceivable… defeating them already seemed impossible, and it would become unthinkable then.

For Sunny and Nephis, that was.

However, that was not at all true for the true rulers of the Dream Realm… the Cursed and Unholy Nightmare Creatures that dwelled in the dark expanses of the Death Zones, and could very well consume all of humanity once the waking world was swallowed by the Realm of the Forgotten God.

The corrupted deities that had already consumed the populations of all the previous Divine Realms infected by the Nightmare Spell.

This whole mess had started because neither Nephis nor Sunny believed that the Sovereigns could face the future trials of the Nightmare Spell. The Sovereigns were great and mighty, and their feats were truly legendary... or had been, once. But they had also grown reticent and complacent, wasting decades doing little more than suffocating the emerging power of humanity and preparing to abandon most of the waking world's population in the coming calamity.

Perhaps they had their reasons, perhaps they believed that theirs was the only way... but their reasons were not good enough, and the path they had chosen would only lead to doom.

So, missing the chance to eliminate them now, while saving countless

lives at the moment… could very well doom all lives in the future.

That was why the choice was so agonizing.

Sunny could not imagine making it… but Nephis had to.

She would have to make it in just a few days.

They still had some time left — time to watch the Two Crossing fall, the Song Army retreat, and the Sword Army surround its camp.

Sunny did not think that either of them would manage to attain Supremacy at that time, so he was preparing to fight the Sovereigns as a Saint.

The three of them — Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie — had planned for this battle for a long time.

However, the plan had to change a little recently.

So, while the Lord of Shadows was observing the troops, one of his shadows stealthily snuck away.

A few moments later, it was on its way to the Nameless Temple… or rather, to the Hollows below it.

It was time to prepare his slumbering army of monsters for war.

As well as take care of its general.

Chapter-2178: Sea of Yearning Stars

At the same time as the Lord of Shadows descended into the Hollows, Master Sunless ascended the steps of the Tower of Hope.

The Ivory Island drifted above the siege camp of the Sword Army, seven torn chains hanging below it and rustling in the wind. There was no need to land the flying Citadel and anchor it securely, since Tyris of White Feather was nearby, keeping the veil of radiant clouds intact.

Below it, the vast encampment sprawled like a dark stain on the white surface of the ancient bone. Countless tents stood in long rows, with more permanent structures towering between them here and there. Myriads of soldiers were busy preparing for the next battle or seeking shelter from the sweltering heat.

Some sat motionlessly with crude blindfolds covering their eyes, tired from the everlasting radiance of day and longing for the soothing touch of darkness. Some were simply too numb to move.

Across the chasm from the vast camp, the Greater Crossing Stronghold stood like a rugged cliff. The battered walls of the impregnable fortress were covered in endless layers of soot and dried blood. The patchwork of repairs held them together, but in some places, the ramparts seemed to sink under their own weight or tilt precariously, marred with numerous deep wounds.

An unbearable miasma rose from the depths of the dark chasm, which had become a collective grave for countless soldiers and enthralled Nightmare Creatures.

Above it all…

Saint Nephis — Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan — stood on the balcony of the Ivory Tower, observing the camp and the stronghold with a detached expression on her breathtakingly beautiful face.

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes.

But even with her eyes closed, she could still feel them.

Tiny sparks of longing shining like countless stars in the darkness, merging into a great celestial bonfire.

The heavens were burning.

Nephis was burning, as well… she was flame itself. All those stars were connected to her, inspired by her. Bathing her in their light, and scorching her with their fire.

The waning flames were growing stronger because of her.

It was easier to sense them with her eyes closed.

The souls illuminating the darkness were her nascent Domain.

Here in Godgrave, under the walls of the bloodstained fortress, these souls were shining especially bright. The siege had been a harrowing, numbing, never-ending nightmare… one would think that those who survived would abandon themselves to hopelessness. But instead, their longing was only growing more intense, more demanding… scorching.

After all, those who were desperate were the ones who hoped desperately.

Their hope had been undergoing a change as of late — or perhaps it was Nephis who was changing.

Before, her nascent Domain was simply there. Her source element. She felt a connection to the souls burning with the spark of longing, and could draw spirit essence from them.

But now, it was as if the sea of yearning stars had grown so vast that

it possessed a mass. That mass… was pulling at her. Calling her. Demanding from her that their hopes were answered.

It was almost painful.

It was almost like the Call of Nightmare.

Maddening.

Nephis sighed.

'How do I complete it?'

She was tired, frustrated… and vexed.

The battles continued. The soldiers kept dying. She had even failed to protect her Fire Keepers… a few of those who survived the Forgotten Shore were now gone.

And yet, Supremacy still remained unattainable.

Everything was in place, and yet something was lacking.

Nephis had prepared the foundation of her future Domain… if anything, it was overdeveloped, by now. Her source element was thriving, and her connection to it was both deep and vast.

Her Transcendent Battle Art was refined to nearly a flawless state.

Her willpower was firm. That had been the easiest part, really… after all, if Nephis lacked willpower, she would have crumbled the first time she experienced the excruciating pain of her Flaw. Every step she took, every battle she fought, every spark of flame she summoned was an act of overcoming herself.

She had never been shy about forcing her will upon the world, either. She sharpened her will against her own soul and used it to cut existence. From the very start, her goal had been to reshape the world according to her will… she already knew how to use it in order to fuel her powers.

She had learned sorcery, and thus knew the feeling of bending the

world to her whims all too well. At its core, the act of invoking True Names of things to affect them was no different from exerting her will upon them, because the Sorcery of Names could not work without being fueled by the willpower of the sorcerer.

She had a talent for it.

It was almost as if Nephis was custom-made to become a Sovereign.

She had even changed her ways and opened her arms to another, exploring passion and longing with her own heart and body. That was a strange and unexpected journey, as well.

But she still did not know how to galvanize her source element and ignite the sea of yearning stars into a blazing pyre.

There was no trick to it. She simply had to will her Domain to be, but her will could not reach the countless flames of longing. It simply passed through them, unable to exert any influence.

'An act of defiance…'

Wasn't she defiant enough?

She had defied impossible odds numerous times. She was defying the Sovereigns… she was defying the Nightmare Spell itself.

What else could she do?

Nephis opened her eyes and looked at the siege camp of the Sword Army.

A sigh escaped from her lips.

Time was running out…

At that moment, she heard the sound of light steps and turned around to see who was coming.

Her mysterious lover stepped onto the balcony and looked at her, a genuine smile illuminating his enchanting face.

A few moments later, he spoke in a pleasant voice:

"I have good news and bad news. Which do you want to hear first?"

Nephis lingered for a moment, involuntary smiling back.

"Let's start with the bad news."

He sighed.

"I am quite certain that Anvil will accelerate the assault on the Lesser Crossing. It might very well start by the end of the day."

Nephis froze, momentarily stunned by the implication.

She frowned.

"What is the good news, then?"

Sunny studied her for a bit, then chuckled.

"The news of Cassie's death was greatly exaggerated."

Nephis blinked.

'Huh?'

"Wait… what? Cassie's death?"

He coughed.

"Oh... right. Actually, there's also the third kind of news. The weird news…"

Chapter-2179: Star of Ruin

It did not take long to describe what had happened to Cassie. The battle with Jest, the many revelations gained from his memories, and her decision to surrender herself to the Song Domain...

As Nephis contemplated silently, Sunny leaned on the parapet and looked down at the siege camp of the Sword Army.

He was suddenly in a wistful mood.

Looking at the distant soldiers from above, Sunny could not help but think about their hopes and dreams. So many lives had been thrown at the walls of the Greater Crossing Stronghold, and so many of those lives had been lost — both on the side of the besieging army and on the side of the besieged.

The soldiers of the Sword Domain were desperate to conquer the impregnable fortress, and the soldiers of the Song Army had defended it with the same measure of resolve and desperation.

But in the end, it would never be taken in battle.

Instead, the Lesser Crossing would fall to a cunning maneuver, and the defenders of the Greater Crossing would be ordered to retreat.

How bitter would they feel, having to abandon the walls that they had defended with their lives?

And how bittersweet would it be for the soldiers of the Sword Army, to take over the fortress where so many of their brothers and sisters had died without having to shed a single drop of theirs?

Wouldn't all of them be overcome by a terrible sense of futility?

Looking at the battered walls of the great fortress, Sunny smiled

crookedly.

'...It's almost as if war is a senseless affair.'

Nephis sighed and leaned on the parapet by his side.

After a few moments of silence, she said evenly:

"I worry about Cassie. She has an… infuriating habit of taking too much upon herself. She will suffer at the hands of the Queen."

Sunny was brought back from his thoughts and lowered his head.

Nephis was right. Cassie would not have gone to the Song side without a good reason, and she seemed to be confident that her safety would not be compromised there — after all, there had been other options to choose from even if she couldn't return to the Sword Army camp.

She could have sought shelter in the Nameless Temple, for example. She could have even killed Jest, returning without him to try and deceive the King.

But even if she was confident that the Queen would not kill her, that did not mean that she would be welcomed with open arms. Clan Song would definitely distrust and scrutinize her… even torture her, perhaps.

A shadow fell over Sunny's face.

"Cassie... knows how to endure suffering. In any case, Ki Song will not have a lot of time to spend on interrogating her."

Even if Cassie was taken to the main camp of the Song Army and held hostage there when it was besieged, the Queen would have her hands too full to pay attention to a turncoat Saint.

Sunny turned his head and studied Nephis:

"...I am more worried about you."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Me? Why would you worry about me?"

He let out a resigned sigh and shook his head.

"Talk about infuriating habits…"

Nephis chuckled lightly. Then, however, her smile dimmed.

Looking back to the siege camp, she asked in a reserved tone:

"Are you worried about me confronting the Sovereigns?"

Sunny nodded slowly.

A little later, he asked with a hint of curiosity in his voice:

"Will you?"

She looked into the distance silently.

Eventually, she said:

"I've been waiting to exact my revenge on them for a long time, you know."

Sunny nodded again.

"I know."

She smiled faintly.

"I won't ask how you know if you don't ask me what I'll do."

The question hung between them for a while. The question itself was burdensome enough, but the answer would be so heavy as to send the Ivory Island crashing from the sky.

What would Nephis do?

Would she give up her defiant resolve to depose the Sovereigns, or would she kill them even if it meant dooming millions of people to their deaths?

Nephis herself did not seem to know the answer, yet.

But Sunny knew.

She was Changing Star, after all… the Star of Ruin. The herald of ruinous change.

There was a reason why she had been given such a True Name.

It was her fate.

And, unlike Sunny… Nephis was still the prisoner of her fate.

So, he had no doubt what she would choose, even if she herself was still hesitating.

It would be just like the Bright Castle, which had been drenched in blood and then burned to the ground according to her will… her will to lead those who survived to salvation from the tyranny of the Nightmare Spell.

He could almost see it…

The Sovereigns would fall, and hundreds of millions of mundane people in the Dream Realm would suddenly become carriers of the Spell, falling asleep on the streets of Bastion, Ravenheart, and every other human city to face the First Nightmare.

Countless lives would be lost, but from the ruins, millions of Awakened warriors would rise, as well.

The world would be changed in an instant… just in time to witness the destruction of Earth and its assimilation into the Dream Realm, as well as the bloody chaos that would follow.

The remaining population of the waking world would face a harrowing culling — but that culling would not be as ultimate and final as it would have been without a staggering vanguard of a hundred million Awakened waiting to meet them on the other side.

The floodgates of Corruption would open, and the profane gods of the Dream Realm would leave their dens at the smell of human souls.

The last human civilization would make its glorious last stand against the tide of nightmares.

And above it all…

Changing Star would shine like a radiant beacon, ruling over humanity and leading it into battle.

Sunny looked down.

'Well. Something like that.'

The future practically wrote itself.

Chapter-2180: Reasons to Live

Standing by his side, Nephis sighed and said quietly:

"You seem to know so much about me, but I... I barely know anything about you. I always hesitate to ask you about your past. Because I am afraid you won't answer."

She was still thinking about his knowledge of how deep her grudge against the Sovereigns went, it seemed.

And other things, as well. Nephis had never pried into his past and never mentioned the oddities of his existence, but she must have been aware of how strange their relationship was.

It was a relationship built on mutual attraction, passion, and affection… but it was also light and ephemeral, as if it would be dispelled by merely mentioning something they were both aware of, and therefore chose to never speak aloud.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then smiled.

"What's so good about the past? Ask me about the future, instead."

Nephis smiled slightly.

"Alright. What will you do once the war is over? Provided that we've won, of course… which we will, no doubt."

Sunny pondered for a few moments.

"Well, let's see…"

He considered his plans. Honestly, the war had preoccupied him fully, so he did not know what he would do and in what order, exactly.

But he had some thoughts, of course.

"First of all, I have to resolve the issue of my newest Shadow… one way or the other. Then, I want to forge a shadowbound Memory for myself. I hoped to do that before the final battle, actually — who knew that bastard, Jest, would throw a wrench in my plans."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"Then, I have to take care of a few people. Aiko needs stable employment… gods know she suffered in that regard enough already. Then there's my disciple, whom I need to introduce to a good sorcery teacher — actually, that disciple of mine is so much work! Not only do I have to invent a way for her to Ascend naturally, I also have to make sure that nobody kills her to prevent that knowledge from spreading. It's going to be a real mess, no doubt. There are a few other acquaintances I want to look after, too."

He looked into the distance, remained silent for a few moments, and said:

"But those are just minor issues. There are a few places I must visit and a few things I must find, as well. Each expedition will be a serious undertaking. I need to explore the ruins of true Bastion. I also need to delve into the Jade Palace and the ice caves below Ravenheart. Then, there is the Night Garden — I've never seen it with my own two eyes, but I am sure that exploring it would become a dreadful adventure, somehow."

Sunny winced.

"Finally… there is the Underworld. There is something I must find there, as well. This one will be the most troublesome — not only because it's one of the most frightening Death Zones in existence, but also because that place is more or less made to render me powerless."

He sighed.

"Oh, right… and I have to explore the Shadow Realm. But that is just a side project."

Saying that, he looked at Nephis and hesitated for a few moments.

"There is one more place, as well. I haven't decided if I really want to return there, though."

He was talking about the Tomb of Ariel, of course.

It seemed like he was destined to come back there, considering that he had met the future version of himself in the Estuary. But then again, Sunny was currently free of the chains of fate. So, his future could very well change…

Probably.

Nephis studied him for a while, a hint of amusement shining in her beautiful eyes.

"That is all? I see… you are an ambitious man, Master Sunless."

…But there was a hint of something else there, as well.

Dissatisfaction? Displeasure?

Sunny fumbled for a few moments, trying to understand what exactly he had said to make her displeased.

Then, it was as if a lightbulb turned on in his head.

'Oh!'

No, really… was he an idiot?

It was not what he had said… it was what he had not said.

Sunny put on his most handsome, charming smile.

"Oh, t—that… you must remember that I have eight bodies now! I can do many things at the same time. Obviously, I am also planning to stay with you… my lady. I will be right there by your side, helping you consolidate your power, govern the vast expanse of the Dream Realm, battle Nightmare Creatures, and prepare for the eventual assimilation of the waking world."

Nephis stared at him for a few moments and nodded with

satisfaction.

Then, she looked away and asked:

"And prepare me delicious food?"

Sunny blinked.

"Why, of course."

She smiled.

"How about giving me massages?"

He coughed.

"I'm glad that you mentioned that. I was thinking of giving you one right now."

Nephis laughed quietly.

"What about romantic dates? Visiting theaters or going on boat rides. And sparring."

Sunny was a bit confused about how sparring had ended up between visiting theaters and rowing boats, but he wisely chose not to voice his doubt.

"Of course. We… will do all these things, and more, together. I wouldn't have it any other way."

Nephis nodded with a smile.

"Good."

As he looked into the distance, though, her smile slowly dimmed, turning faint and brittle.

After a while, she said:

"Make sure not to die then, Master Sunless. You promised."

Sunny wrapped his hand around her waist and pulled her closer.

Her body felt hot against his own.

"I am quite hard to kill, you know. Unless my soul is completely destroyed, I have plenty of spare bodies to retreat into."

She turned her head and looked into his eyes.

Her alluring lips were entirely too close.

"Let us survive, then. Both of us. Shall we?"

Instead of answering, Sunny leaned forward and kissed her.

Their kiss was deep, intimate, and desperate…

That was the best answer he could give, anyway.

Who would want to die and never taste her sweet lips again?

Sunny wanted to survive. He had to survive, no matter what.

Chapter-2181: Break Point

Rain was sprawled on the ground, breathing shallowly. She was too tired to move, and had no desire to either. There was a black fabric covering her face, so it was a bit dark, at least… the merciless radiance of the incandescent sky would have easily penetrated mundane cloth, but she was brazenly using [In Case of Emergency] to hide from the suffocating light.

Who would have known that she would miss the frigid nights of Ravenheart one day?

It was so damn hot.

And she was so damn spent.

Physically, mentally… emotionally.

The siege of the Greater Crossing had been a terrible affair. In fact, Rain had no words to describe how terrible, terrifying, hideous, and utterly horrid it had been. The endless battles, the heavy losses, the dwindling supplies… the torturous, ever-present heat. By now, the soldiers were not even despondent, they were simply numb.

As if their capacity to comprehend horror and their endurance had been completely overwhelmed.

…It was quite a feat, to overwhelm the mental endurance of her fellow soldiers. All of them had overcome Nightmares and braved the dreadful reaches of the Dream Realm to become Awakened, after all.

All except for her. She had never set foot into a Nightmare… at least not a Nightmare created by the Spell.

The nightmare she was living had been created entirely with human hands. Four hands in particular — four lofty, royal hands.

Rain was too tired to think about the King and the Queen. She had no energy to feel resentment. Her eyes were covered, and while she had no essence to spare on frivolous things, the passive effect of the [Pièce de Résistance] was still enough to prevent her from baking in the heat.

She could stay still.

"Rani…"

Rain groaned.

She remained motionless for a few moments, then slowly sat up. [In Case of Emergency] slipped from her eyes, and the merciless radiance of Godgrave battered them with blinding intensity. She squinted with a grimace, waiting for her pupils to adjust to the light.

It felt like someone was driving nails into her head.

Soon enough, Rain could see Tamar, Ray, and Fleur — the four of them had sprawled on the ground almost in a pile after descending from the wall. Their tents had been destroyed days ago during one of the battles, and with the supply situation being what it was, no one was going to issue them new ones.

Of course, there were plenty of empty tents in the camp of the Song Army these days. Too many soldiers had died, after all… but finding and salvaging an empty tent was too much work, so they had simply been sleeping on the ground.

It was Ray who had called her. Raising a hand, he said tiredly:

"Water."

Rain sighed, then summoned the Green Canteen and handed it to him.

Then, she looked around.

The Song Army had stubbornly endured the endless assaults, but that did not mean that it was unscathed. On the contrary, the courtyard of the great fortress where the army was camped looked like a

graveyard, instead.

And the soldiers looked like walking corpses.

These days, it was hard to tell them apart from the Queen's pilgrims at times.

Everyone was shocked into numbness by the relentless siege.

However…

That had changed subtly in the last few days.

Rain could not quite describe it, but it was as if a feverish tension was slowly permeating the air.

Because the soldiers could feel it… that the siege was going to end soon.

There was no deep reason behind that feeling and no profound calculations they had made to come to such a conclusion, but nevertheless, everyone was suddenly infected by the idea.

The reason was simple… people had a breaking point, and the soldiers had long reached theirs. If it was this bad in the camp of the Song Army, then their enemy had to be faring even worse — attacking a fortress was far more arduous than defending it, after all. Rain and her comrades knew that they were going to break soon, and so, they hoped that the Sword Army would break first.

Some even hoped for a miracle, even though there were no benign miracles in the world of the Nightmare Spell. Only harrowing omens.

Well, and there was a more concrete reason, as well.

It was that the Saints had been involving themselves in the battles as of late.

Before, the prohibition of the Queen prevented them from taking part in the defense of the fortress, but all kinds of rules and boundaries had become vague now. As a result, the Saints of both Domains entered the fray from time to time, relieving the Awakened soldiers.

Of course, once a Saint from one side joined the battle, a Saint from the other side would arrive to prevent them from doing too much harm.

But the Song Domain had more Saints than the enemy, at least. And Changing Star herself had not drawn her sword yet, limiting her occasional participation to healing the soldiers.

Since the Saints were fighting, the situation must have been really desperate.

Ray drank a bit of water from the Green Canteen and handed it to Fleur. Fleur handed it to Tamar, and Tamar returned it to Rain.

After everyone had their fill, Ray spoke hoarsely:

"Something is going on, isn't it?"

Rain raised an eyebrow.

"What exactly do you mean?"

The question was too broad. Many things were going on, most of them bad or outright terrible.

The young man looked in the direction where a tall, scorched tent stood shining in the ruthless light — it was the command tent of the Seventh Legion.

He said:

"Nobody had seen Princess Seishan on the wall today. She seems to have disappeared somewhere… a few guys saw her leaving while we slept. Considering her position, the only thing that could force her to move is an order from the Queen. So, I bet something is afoot."

Tamar remained silent for a while, then shrugged.

"Even if something is, that's none of our business."

Rain nodded.

"I'm sure we'll learn in due time."

With that, however, she glanced at her shadow.

Unnoticed by anyone, the shadow subtly signaled her that they would talk later.

She sighed.

'So something really is afoot.'

Ray, that guy… he truly had the instincts of a rat. He sensed danger better than most diviners in the employ of the Song Army.

Just as he thought that, his face suddenly changed, growing pale. His eyes widened.

A moment later, Rain sensed a deep shadow moving in their direction, and felt her heartbeat growing calmer.

The shadow fell on their pitiful group, and she turned around to look up at the person who approached them.

Then, she blinked.

'O—oh?'

There was a tall man standing above them, looking down with an aloof expression. His handsome face seemed to be carved from stone, and his eyes were as calm as a lake.

She knew who it was, of course… it was the Saint of Sorrow.

Tamar's dad.

What Rain did not know, however, was what he was doing here. He had never once shown initiative to seek out his daughter since the start of the war.

Until today.

Tamar looked as surprised to see her dad as Rain did. She stood up hurriedly and bowed her head to greet him.

"Father."

He lingered for a moment, then nodded to accept her greeting.

"Tamar. Let us talk."

She studied him carefully.

"You can speak in front of my friends."

He spared them a short glance, then sighed.

"...Alright. It is for the best, since what I am about to tell you concerns them, as well."

The Saint of Sorrow paused for a moment, then looked directly at Tamar.

"Leave the Greater Crossing Stronghold. I will arrange a transfer with Saint Seishan as soon as she returns. Your cohort will be assigned guard duty, escorting supply caravans from the Song Domain."

Guard duty…

That meant that they would have to return to the main camp of the Song Army, then descend from Godgrave to the Moonriver Plains… and come back with the next supply caravan.

They would not have to participate in the defense of the fortress anymore.

This was great news… however, it made Rain shiver.

Her eyes widened as she stared at the Saint of Sorrow, stunned.

There could only be one reason why he would sacrifice his dignity to arrange something like that.

It was that he believed that the Greater Crossing would fall, and wanted to make sure that his daughter did not perish with it.

'No way…'

Rain knew that the morale in the Song Army was woefully low. The soldiers did not believe in victory anymore — or rather, they did not care about it anymore.

But if the Saint of Sorrow, one of the most stalwart champions of the Song Domain, was doing something like that…

It meant that hopelessness had infected even the Saints, now.

Things were far worse than Rain had anticipated.

Tamar's lower lip trembled.

Nevertheless, she controlled her emotions and managed to maintain her composure.

Her voice remained even:

"What about you?"

The Saint of Sorrow looked at her for a few long moments.

Then, he said simply:

"I'll stay."

With that, he raised his hand, froze for a second, and hesitantly patted her on the shoulder.

Not saying anything else, the Saint of Sorrow turned around and walked away, his broad back seemingly as solid as a cliff.

Tamar was left standing, watching him leave with a distant expression.

Rain wanted to comfort her friend, but at that moment, her shadow signaled her to move.

Letting out a sigh, Rain frowned and stood up.

She raised the Green Canteen.

"I'll go and try to find some water. You guys rest."

She left her cohort behind and headed in the opposite direction from where the Saint of Sorrow had gone.

When there was no one around to hear her, she whispered:

"What?"

Her brother quietly:

"Seishan is returning to the fortress. She's not alone, either… she's escorting a prisoner."

He lingered for a moment, then said:

"Go take a look."

Chapter-2182: Royal Hospitality

Step. Step. Another step.

The chains rattled as Cassie walked, trying to maintain some of her dignity despite the shackles. She was quite used to those, luckily, having spent most of her time in the Third Nightmare chained.

However, it was different this time.

Things had gone more or less as expected when she and Helie emerged from the Hollows and were found by the forces of Song. It was a lone pilgrim who had noticed them first, but once one of the Queen's puppets did, all of them knew.

So, her daughters did not take long to arrive from the Lesser Crossing Stronghold — Lonesome Howl, Silent Stalker, and Death Singer. They were the ones whom Cassie surrendered herself to.

Regardless of the severity of the situation… observing their confused expressions had really been quite fun.

'Should I get captured more often?'

Cassie did her best to remain calm, entertaining herself with such thoughts.

Helie and her were quickly separated. She gave her account of what had happened, mentioning Jest and his plot to have her killed — giving an explanation of why she was defecting that Helie could corroborate. There was not a word of lie in what Cassie told them.

Of course, she omitted the real reason why she had decided to seek shelter in the embrace of the Great Clan Song, making the entire tale a deception.

Truth was funny that way, sometimes.

There was no telling if the Song sisters believed her. Helie was welcomed quite well, at least… that was a relief. It seemed that the Queen still held some affection for her old mentor, Master Orum — enough so to spare his niece, if nothing else.

But the same benevolence did not extend to Cassie. Clan Song was wary of her, and so, she was treated as a prisoner, not as a guest.

…An important prisoner, at least.

That was just what Cassie had expected. When Seishan hastily arrived from the Greater Crossing to take her away in secret, Cassie was not surprised, either.

The Lost Princess of Song looked just as elegant and graceful as ever, but honestly, she had lost some of her luster. Nobody would go so far as to call her appearance ragged, and yet the signs of fatigue and mental exhaustion were nothing short of evident.

Well, it was understandable… she was the commander in charge of defending the Greater Crossing Stronghold, after all, having resisted none other than Nephis for weeks. Knowing who her enemy was, it seemed like a miracle that Seishan was even able to stand upright.

Cassie could understand, but she was still surprised. She still vividly remembered how Seishan was on the Forgotten Shore — granted, back then, all Cassie knew was her refined, husky voice… and the faint scent of blood that seemed to follow Seishan wherever she went.

Seishan had never lost the smallest bit of her refinement then.

But it was different now.

"Cassia."

The voice was still the same.

The scent of blood was much stronger, though… not that anyone but Cassie could smell it.

Now that Seishan entered, the guards stationed outside could not see her anymore, and therefore, Cassie could not see her either. She released her mark and sighed, feeling like she had returned to the past.

The voice and the scent were all that remained.

Cassie had been kept in a tent on the edges of the Lesser Crossing encampment, away from prying eyes. The tent was small and flimsy, barely dimming the radiance of the cloudy sky. The clasp had been tightly shut, as well, so the heat inside was nearly unbearable.

No one had brought her food or water, either. She was not too hungry yet, but the thirst was dreadful.

'Am I being tortured, already?'

Cassie opened her mouth and said — or rather, croaked:

"I greet Princess Seishan."

There were a few moments of silence, and then the husky voice asked:

"What are you scheming now?"

Cassie was more sensitive to voices than most people. To her, they were like a painting that brimmed with vivid color, hiding countless nuances. Seishan's voice was calm, collected, strong… but not harsh. Instead, it was soft, refined, and elegant.

But behind it all, obscured by the more beautiful colors, there was a different hue. A subtle note of tiredness, tinged with a speck of disillusionment and apprehension.

Mundane people saw Saints as demigods, but Saints were people, too. They were not immune to the shocking horrors of Godgrave… even someone as impervious to shock and trauma as Seishan, who had endured a decade of the Forgotten Shore, could not escape the dread of war unscathed.

Cassie smiled faintly.

"Would you believe me if I said that I am scheming to kill both Sovereigns and replace them with someone better?"

Her own voice was hoarse and ugly due to thirst and mistreatment.

But every word was carefully chosen and calculated. Seishan was right to assume that Cassie had a hidden motive to enter the camp of the Song Army… however, her scheme had nothing to do with taking action.

Instead, it was all about talking.

Seishan remained silent for a while, then chuckled.

"You can barely speak. That won't do… guards! Bring our esteemed guest some refreshments."

Then, her garments rustled quietly as she walked over to a folding chair and sat down.

"Someone better, you say… why, I have no doubt that you believe Changing Star to be a better option. I do not doubt that she has no shortage of splendid ambitions, either. However, I also know why the two of you lowered your heads to Valor and have been biding your time, serving them as loyal dogs for all these years."

She seemed to have leaned forward a little.

"It is because no matter how you searched and how much you prepared, you've found no way to actually defeat one Sovereign, let alone two. Something like that is outside the realm of possibility, so stop playing games. What are you really after?"

Cassie tried to laugh, but her throat was so parched that she convulsed in a coughing fit, instead.

"...Alright. You saw right through me."

Seishan waited for a bit, then asked incredulously:

"That's it? You're not going to say anything else?"

Cassie considered her answer carefully. While she was doing that, there was the sound of the tent entrance opening, and her mouth watered at the smell of food.

Seishan sent the guard away.

"Help yourself so that we could speak comfortably. Oh… I hope you'll be satisfied with a humble meal, Lady Cassia. It's just basic military rations and some wine — supply situations have been rough for us, as of late. Thanks to you and your sellsword Saint."

Cassie smiled faintly.

Seeing that she did not move, Seishan asked:

"Do you need help?"

Cassie pursed her lips, then shook her head.

"I can do it myself."

Activating her Awakened Ability, she walked over to the table and picked up a carafe of wine. The wine was watered down, of course, serving as something to satiate one's thirst rather than to lighten one's mood.

Careful not to topple anything with her chains, Cassie poured herself some and brought the goblet to her lips.

The faint scent of blood emanating from Seishan was almost overpowering at such a close distance, but she was too thirsty to care about such things.

Cassie drank deeply, feeling the cold and fragrant liquid soothe her throat.

'Ah...'

Lowering the goblet, she swayed slightly and turned to face Seishan.

"...You put something in the wine, didn't you?"

Seishan chuckled.

"I did."

Cassie exhaled slowly.

She had expected something like that, as well.

Chapter-2183: Drops of Poison

Cassie did not know what Seishan had mixed into the wine, but the effect was truly sinister.

She felt dazed, as if her head was spinning — even though it wasn't. Her body felt overly sensitive, but at the same time sluggish and hard to control. She could just barely prevent herself from swaying while taking a step.

It was almost as if she was drunk.

Actually, Cassie would not know, since she had never been drunk before. She had not tasted alcohol prior to becoming an Awakened, and later, her body was too resilient to be intoxicated easily. The memories of those under the influences of substances were usually jumbled and confusing, too, while her Ascended Ability only granted her access to the mark's senses, not their mind.

So, she could only imagine.

If that was what being drunk felt like… she wanted none of it.

'Ah. How vile.'

Much worse than her dazed condition was the fact that her soul was in the same state — that was why the strange drug Seishan had made her drink was so startling and sinister.

Cassie could barely control her Aspect. In fact, she was not sure if she could control it at all… trying to activate her Aspect Abilities made her dizzy, and the input she received from them was fragmented at best, and unreliable at worst.

She could not get a grasp on her essence, either, which now flowed freely and refused to follow her will.

She could not even pull on her tether and return to the waking world. It was still there, somewhere in her soul… presumably. But she could not sense it.

'How insidious.'

The royal clan of the Sword Domain possessed deep knowledge of runic sorcery and had many capable craftsmen. So, it was no surprise that they could create restraints capable of imprisoning Awakened, Ascended, and even Saints — like the cage in the Night Temple where she had nearly died in solitude, or the cell where Master Orum was kept, interrogated, and eventually killed.

Clan Song was not ignorant of runic sorcery, of course, but their attainments were much more modest. Ki Song had not risen to prominence until the first great Awakened families were already deeply established, after all, so her clan's foundation was shallow in comparison.

Nevertheless, it seemed that Song had their own ways of solving problems.

Cassie did not know what kind of mystical poison she had ingested, but its effects were in no way inferior to a cage created by the runesmiths of Clan Valor. In fact, in some aspects, it was even superior.

For one, she could be freely moved.

Seishan had given her just enough time to finish the meal, then immediately took her away from the Lesser Crossing. She also put a bag over Cassie's head — quite unceremoniously, at that.

Obviously, the bag was not meant to obscure her vision. Cassie was blind, and now that she could not use her Aspect, she was almost as helpless as a mundane blind person would be. The bag was meant to prevent other people from looking at her, instead.

After all, Cassie was supposed to be dead. Clan Song might have been wary of her schemes, but they saw the advantage of maintaining that part of her deceit, at least.

The bag was a simple, but adequate tool of keeping her identity hidden. That said, it did not smell too good and quickly turned into an oven under the radiant light of Godgrave, making it hard for her to breathe.

Cassie endured the discomfort in silence.

Judging by the scent, the sound, and the subtle presence… Seishan had arrived on the back of a Nightmare Creature enthralled by Beastmaster. Now, both of them were standing on its carapace as the creature ran across the bone plain.

They were probably heading to the Greater Crossing Stronghold, where Cassie would have an audience with the Queen.

The Western First Rib, where the Lesser Crossing was located, was not too far from the Greater Crossing. However, there was a great difference in elevation between them, as well as a wide abyss. So, in order to ascend to the Collarbone Plain, one had to travel west, use a series of elevators constructed by Clan Song, and then return east.

The Nightmare Creature was swift, but it would still take them a long time to reach its destination… or so Cassie had thought before the beast leapt, and she was suddenly overcome by a sense of weightlessness. Then, the carapace moved beneath her, and she heard a loud rustling sound, as if a dragonfly was beating its wings.

'We're flying.'

So, that was how Seishan had arrived so soon.

Cassie had less time than she had hoped for.

After remaining silent for a while, she spoke:

"How many of your Handmaidens died in this war?"

Seishan seemed to turn her head, studying her.

Eventually, she answered neutrally:

"Two."

There was a short pause, and she added with the smallest hint of reluctance in her voice:

"...It would have been three, if not for Nephis."

Cassie smiled bitterly.

"I lost seven of my Fire Keepers."

She wondered how her own voice sounded, muffled by the thick bag.

"Well, at least none of your sisters died. You are lucky."

Seishan remained silent for a while.

"You are wrong."

Cassie raised an eyebrow, then remembered that Seishan could not see her face.

Was that how people felt when they spoke to her?

"What do you mean?"

Finally, Seishan's voice betrayed a bitter feeling, becoming painted by a much darker palette of emotions than the vibrant splendor of her usual hues.

"I have more sisters than people tend to remember. None of the seven of us who had reached Transcendence died. But that doesn't mean that we lost no one."

Cassie remained silent for a while, pretending to be surprised by the news.

...Of course, she knew how many adopted daughters Ki Song had, what their Ranks were, and which of them had perished in the war.

Seishan seemed to think that Cassie's goal was to gain an audience with the Queen, for whatever reason — perhaps to strike a deal, or maybe even try something daring and unwise.

But she was wrong.

Cassie did want to speak with the Queen, but her true target… was already in her grasp.

It was Seishan herself.

Seishan had put something in her drink, and Cassie was returning the favor.

Every carefully chosen word she spoke was a drop of poison.

She just had to be subtle about it, so that her target remained none the wiser… and so that by the time her poison took hold, it was already too late to administer an antidote.

Cassie's goal in the camp of the Song Army was to turn the daughters of Ki Song against their mother, removing them from her Domain when the time to choose sides came.

Chapter-2184: The Other Side

After some time, the Nightmare Creature landed. Cassie was in such a poor state that she almost rolled off its carapace — luckily, Seishan extended a hand to catch her.

As they descended from the beast's back, Cassie could feel the solid surface of the ancient bone under her feet once more. The bone was the same, and the heat was the same… but the wind was different.

That was because they weren't on the First Rib anymore, and thus were not shielded from the winds rolling down the slopes of the Hollow Mountains anymore. They had arrived on the Collarbone Plain.

The Great Crossing Stronghold — and the Queen of Worms — had to be close now.

Which meant that this could very well be Cassie's last chance to talk to Seishan. However, she remained silent, knowing that being too obvious would only be harmful. The seeds she wanted to plant had already been planted… the soil was already made rich by the senseless war.

Now, all she had to do was wait for the rains to come, and see the seeds she had sown sprout to life.

…Hopefully.

Another reason why Cassie remained silent was that, soon enough, they were surrounded by the sound of steps. She shivered, suddenly overcome by an eerie sense of incongruity… because those steps sounded like they were made by humans, and yet, there were no other subtle sounds that humans always made to accompany them.

No breathing. No heartbeat. No rustle of clothes or scraping of armor

from the small gestures people usually made.

'Pilgrims.'

Dozens of pilgrims gathered around them, serving as a silent escort.

Surrounded by the dead from all sides, Cassie was led across the bone plain by Seishan.

Step. Step. Another step.

Her chains rattled quietly.

Soon enough, a nearly overwhelming sea of sounds and smells washed over her, and Cassie realized that they were nearing the Greater Crossing Stronghold.

'I made such a long journey... just to end up so close to where I had started.'

Beyond the fortress built from the bones of a Great Demon lay the chasm, and beyond the chasm, across a stretch of battered bone, lay the siege camp of the Sword Army. The Ivory Island was right above it, drifting between the corpse of a dead god and the annihilating sky.

Nephis was so close, but also so impossibly distant.

This small distance — the two army camps, the fortress wall, and the dark chasm — was perhaps the hardest piece of land to cross in all of human history.

Cassie sighed as they entered the vast courtyard of the stronghold. It sounded and smelled almost exactly like the siege camp of the Sword Army, except for the fact that there was the ghastly scent of Nightmare Creatures added to the mix here, as well.

Almost as if the people on the opposite sides of the chasm were exactly the same, and had no real reason to be divided into two warring armies.

As Cassie walked through the camp of the Song Army, surrounded by pilgrims, the strange procession inevitably drew attention. However,

no one could see her well behind the barrier of walking corpses.

Still…

One of Sunny's incarnations was somewhere here. He had to be watching, no doubt.

She hoped that he would not do anything hasty.

Cassie shifted her hands slightly, causing the chains to rattle. Her fingers moved, but nobody who saw it would have been able to read the signal she was giving.

Because she wasn't using her fingers to relay the message.

Instead, it was their shadow that formed a simple sign.

'I am alright.'

She hoped he sensed it.

Now that everything was at stake, each of them had their part to play. Cassie had already done everything she could, except for this one final task. That was what she had to concentrate on, trusting in Nephis and Sunny to finish the job.

Nothing else mattered.

"Am I going to see the Queen now?"

Seishan answered dryly:

"Yes."

Cassie took a deep breath, wondering what Ki Song was like.

Was she still like the little girl she had seen in Orum's memories? The young woman who had been left all alone in the cruel world, seeking vengeance against those who had betrayed her mother and stole her inheritance? The confident leader who led her people to prosperity despite great adversity?

Or were all traces of Ki Song Master Orum had known erased by

time, with only the cold and ruthless visage of the Raven Queen left in her wake?

Cassie hesitated.

"Any advice?"

The question seemed comical, but who else could she ask if not Seishan? Ki Song was her mother, after all.

Strangely enough, Seishan lingered with the answer.

"Why are you asking me?"

Cassie smiled secretly, pleased.

"You are one of her daughters, after all. Is there someone who understands her better?"

Seishan scoffed.

"Why should I help an enemy of Clan Song understand her?"

Cassie sighed in dejection.

"An enemy? Oh my. You were calling me an esteemed guest just earlier…"

But she wasn't really disappointed. The response did not really matter. The questions themselves were more important.

Nevertheless, unexpectedly, Seishan did give her an answer.

"I won't presume to understand my mother. But… she has been lonely, I think. She must be, since there is no one around her who isn't either her servant or her responsibility. In that sense, an enemy is much more precious."

She paused for a moment, and then added:

"...Misuse this information, and I will kill you."

Cassie smiled darkly, suppressing a sigh.

Seishan must have hoped that Cassie was attempting to strike a deal with her mother — and, therefore, Nephis was.

But she was wrong.

Nephis only intended to kill her mother, while at the same time hoping not to have to kill Seishan and her sisters in the aftermath.

The Queen had to be dealt with, but slaying the Seven Princesses and destroying Clan Song would be a great loss. Having them fight for humanity in the future was a priceless luxury.

It all depended on whether Seishan and her sisters could be reasoned with after their mother fell.

'What a mess.'

Cassie did not know where they arrived, but could feel a cool shadow falling over her.

Then, there was the sound of a heavy gate opening, and she was led away from the unbearable heat into a chillingly cold space.

Her audience with the Queen was about to start.

Chapter-2185: Ravensong

Seishan led Cassie into the depths of the cold structure. The deeper they went and the more gates they passed, the colder it became, until Cassie could not help but shiver.

Eventually, complete silence enveloped them.

'Where is she?'

Although Cassie was in a strange state and couldn't really control her Aspect, her Dormant Ability was still working — even if it was much more difficult to understand what it was telling her than usual. So, she was curious to see what the runes would tell her about the Queen.

Chances were they were going to tell her very little, since someone as powerful as Ki Song would without a doubt have protected herself against curious diviners. Still, she hoped to learn something.

Seishan placed a hand on Cassie's shoulder, forcing her to stop, then pressed down gently. Cassie had no choice but to kneel.

The bag was taken off her head.

She could not hear anything, she could not smell anything. Her Dormant Ability seemed to hint that there was no one in front of her.

And yet, she felt it… a deep, profound presence that seemed to drown the entire world. As if there was an immense, ancient, terrifying beast hiding in the darkness right in front of her.

Struggling against her dazed mind, Cassie reached toward the mark she had left on Seishan and activated it.

Perhaps because they were so close, or perhaps purely by luck, she

actually managed to maintain a tenuous hold on her Ascended Ability, this time…

And shuddered.

Looking through Seishan's eyes, she could finally see where they were.

A large stone chamber surrounded them, full of shadows. Cold light was pouring from high above, illuminating a lonesome stone throne.

A breathtakingly beautiful woman was sitting on the throne, her red gown spilling over its steps like a river of blood. Her skin was pale as that of a corpse, and her hair was like a stream of impenetrable, lustrous darkness.

A faint smile was playing on her tantalizing lips, and her eyes were, were…

Mesmerizing… but at the same time eerie and disturbing. There was a hint of emptiness and distance about them, like that of someone who was long dead.

She was the source of the wild, overwhelming, bestial presence Cassie had sensed.

If Anvil's presence was heavy and oppressive, then Ki Song's presence was subtle — and more frightening for it. Cassie felt fear grasp her heart with icy claws.

It was the ancient, primal fear that all living beings felt in the presence of a superior predator.

Two youths — a boy and a girl — were standing at either side of the throne, staring into the distance with empty eyes.

It took Cassie a few moments to realize that neither of them was alive.

No…

None of the three were.

Because the breathtaking woman sitting on the throne was, without a doubt, dead too.

Shaking off her shock, Cassie shivered and bowed deeply.

"Greetings, Your Majesty."

The dead woman turned her head slightly and looked at her, making Cassie's entire body tremble against her will.

Ki Song did not speak. Instead, the dead boy standing to her left opened his mouth and said in a clear voice:

"Song of the Fallen…"

Almost at the same time, the dead girl spoke as well:

"...I've been curious to meet you."

Cassie tried to calm her wildly beating heart and straightened her back, facing the dead woman on the throne.

'There is nothing.'

Her Dormant Ability did not show her anything, as if there was no one in front of her at all. Almost as if…

Her expressions changed.

"You… are a puppet."

The Queen leaned back on the throne, while the dead girl laughed melodiously.

Cassie barely prevented herself from swaying. Her thoughts became tangled.

Ki Song — her original body — was merely a puppet, just like the two youths and the rest of her pilgrims. She was nothing but a dead body animated by the power of her Aspect.

Then where was her true vessel?

Cassie pursed her lips.

"I am not sure that we've really met then, Your Majesty. If I may be so bold as to ask… where is the real you?"

Ki Song looked at her with a smile. The boy answered:

"Everywhere."

Cassie shuddered.

'Everywhere…'

She understood what the Queen meant instinctually. It was not that any of her dead puppets could serve as the vessel of her soul… it was that all of them were the vessel, and she existed everywhere the myriads of her pilgrims were, always, all at once.

Which meant that in order to kill the Raven Queen… one would have to eradicate all of her countless puppets, no matter where they were.

How were Nephis and Sunny meant to do that?

Cassie remained silent for a while.

Eventually, she exhaled slowly.

"All across Godgrave, your puppets are with the soldiers of the Song Army. They are the first to attack, and the first ones to be cut down. That means that you have fought a thousand battles, Your Majesty, and were killed ten thousand times."

Ki Song — the puppet made from her original body — tilted her head.

"...A million battles. Ten million deaths."

Whenever she wanted to speak, one of the two dead youths would do it in her stead. Two clear voices would harmonize at times, then separate again, making it seem like countless people were talking.

Cassie gathered her courage.

She hesitated for a few long moments, then said:

"I was with Master Orum when he died. I glimpsed his memories."

Ki Song lowered her head, her expression betraying a hint of melancholy for a fleeting moment.

"Uncle Orie…"

A subtle sigh escaped from her enchanting lips.

But that hint of emotion was gone in an instant, replaced by inhuman composure.

"What about it?"

Cassie took a deep breath.

"He was your teacher, was he not? He asked the students of the Academy once about what the essence of combat was. Your answer… was failure. You said that if someone is forced to fight, they have already failed."

Ki Song looked at her curiously.

"So what if I did?"

Cassie smiled darkly.

"Why this war, then? Is it not the greatest failure one can imagine?"

The Queen remained silent for a few moments.

Then, both of the dead youths laughed brightly, their clear voices fusing together flawlessly.

When their laughter grew quiet, the dead girl spoke:

"Of course, it is. I thought that would be self-evident."

Chapter-2186: Master of Puppets

Cassie remained silent for a few moments.

'Self-evident...'

Was that the answer she had expected? Or the opposite of it? She was not sure, since Ki Song — the Raven Queen — was a nebulous existence. She was much more reticent and withdrawn than Anvil, ruling the Song Domain from the depths of her obsidian palace.

Who knew what was on her mind?

Cassie smiled faintly.

"If you see the war as failure, why did you start it?"

The dead queen studied her quietly, then sighed.

"Are you really in the position to ask me questions, Song of the Fallen?"

There was no particular threat in her voice, but Cassie shivered.

What position was she in?

Blind, stripped of her Aspect, driven to her knees, and at the mercy of her captors… it was hard to imagine someone more powerless.

And yet, that was exactly where Cassie wanted to be. That was the position from which she was planning to break the Song Domain.

But Ki Song did not have to know that.

Cassie raised her chin slightly.

"I guess I am not. However, I know a lot of secrets… one of them in particular would be of great value to Your Majesty."

Ki Song raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? You want to barter with me…"

Before the dead boy even finished speaking, the dead girl laughed.

Then, both of them abruptly grew silent.

The Queen looked at Cassie coldly, making her heart beat like a bird trapped in a cage.

"But I don't need to pay. Any secret you have, I can simply take."

She raised a hand in a fluid, elegant motion…

And at the same time, Cassie's own hand rose, mirroring what Ki Song had done.

She turned her head, studying it in horror.

"Y—you… you…"

The Queen smiled coldly.

"You have drunk of my blood. Now, you are my puppet. You will do as I command, whether you like it or not."

Cassie struggled to suppress the trembling that had overwhelmed her body. She failed to do so, so Ki Song did it for her. As her slender hand turned into a fist, Cassie's body grew motionless.

Only her eyes, hidden by the blindfold, were moving erratically.

'...I see. Makes sense.'

So what Seishan had mixed into the wine was not poison, but a drop of Ki Song's blood. And now, the Queen could control Cassie's body like a marionette… her soul as well, at least to some degree.

But not to an absolute degree. Otherwise, Cassie would not have

access to her Aspect at all.

'Does she control her daughters the same way, I wonder?'

If so, that would be a problem.

However, Cassie did not think that that was the case.

Firstly, because she had perceived the Queen's daughters with her Dormant Ability. If they had been turned into puppets, she would have learned it then.

Second of all… it was simply because Ki Song and her adopted daughters, ironically enough, resembled a normal family much more than Anvil and his biological children did.

The Queen actually cared about Seishan and her sisters. Therefore, she would not have done something so terrible and violating to them.

Cassie tried to regain her composure.

After a few long moments, she opened her mouth and said slowly:

"I've been meaning to ask… how come your puppets don't rot? It was somewhat possible to explain in Ravenheart, where it's usually cold. But here in Godgrave, the heat is terrible. And yet, there is no stench."

The insult in her words was not even that hidden.

The Queen studied her for a moment, then chuckled.

"Insolent girl."

A moment later, Cassie's hand rose on its own and dug into her cheek, leaving four deep cuts on it.

Red blood splattered on the floor, and Cassie bit her lips to suppress a groan.

Ki Song could have punished her much more thoroughly, but did not seem inclined to do that... yet.

Instead, he gestured to herself.

"To satisfy your curiosity, my puppets don't rot because they are under my control. If I want to make them rot, they will…"

At her words, the beautiful woman on the throne suddenly changed. Black spots appeared on her flawless skin, swiftly turning into revolting pustules. Her skin sagged, as if the muscles beneath were disappearing. Her beautiful hair turned bleak and brittle before falling off her scalp in clumps.

In a matter of seconds, the corpse went through various stages of decomposition, until a hideous mummy was left sitting on the throne.

The mummy calmly lowered her hand, and one of the two dead youths spoke:

"...and if I want them to stay as they were, they won't."

Then, as Cassie watched with a sense of trepidation, the body of Ki Song changed once more. This time, the process of decomposition seemed to happen in reverse, and seconds later, she was once again whole and breathtakingly beautiful.

The Queen's crimson lips twisted into a mesmerizing smile.

"There are different levels of mastery to puppetry, you see. And I have mastered them all."

Cassie shivered, suddenly realizing that Ki Song was not merely limited to controlling the movements of her puppets. No… her control went much deeper than that.

Which meant that if the Queen so wished, she could make Cassie's own body rot and decompose, as well.

'That… would be a new nightmare, even for me.'

Ki Song grew silent for a while, looking at Cassie with a distant look.

Then, she sighed.

Her sigh was immaculately natural — to a degree that Cassie could not truly believe that she was looking at a puppeteered corpse that did not even need to breathe, not of a living woman.

Every little detail was flawless. The posture, the slight tilt of her head, the smallest facial expression… it was hard to believe that Ki Song was controlling every tiny muscle in her body consciously to produce the illusion of natural life. She had not just mastered all levels of puppeteering — she was an artist.

The Queen shook her head elegantly, and then said using the dead girl's mouth:

"In truth, this war of ours was inevitable."

Her gaze turned a little distant.

"It was set in stone the moment Smile of Heaven died..."

Chapter-2187: Seeds of War

Cassie held her breath, stunned and intrigued by the Queen's words.

Smile of Heaven? What role did she have to play in the war between Valor and Song?

Even Seishan seemed surprised, tilting her head slightly. It seemed that she was hearing this for the first time, too.

Cassie raised an eyebrow.

"Smile of Heaven? Immortal Flame's daughter?"

Ki Song nodded, her expression turning a little wistful.

"If you really witnessed Uncle Orie's memories, then you should know. How exceptional she was; how the world itself seemed to revolve around her. As if she was beloved by heavens — if not, then at least by the Nightmare Spell. She was the daughter of the first man to become a Master, and she was the first person to receive her True Name in the First Nightmare. Her future seemed boundless. Ah, but that was not even what was so exceptional about Smile of Heaven. What was truly amazing was how easily she could bring people together."

The Queen turned to gaze at Cassie and smiled.

"...Maybe that was the talent our world needed the most, and why she was so beloved by it. After all, no one survives in the Dream Realm alone. And no one can defy the Nightmare Spell alone, either."

She grew silent for a few moments.

"We were the no different… Broken Sword and his cohort. He might have been the deadliest among us, and Anvil might have been the

most stalwart. I had my uses, as well — a perfect Utility Aspect to complement their fearsome power, and enough tenacity to survive the most dire perils. And then there was the Dreamspawn, whose cunning and insidious Aspect could solve problems that strength and courage could not. But it was Smile of Heaven who was the glue that held us all together."

Cassie could not help but think about Nephis… Nephis, who could not be more different from her mother. She was the direct opposite of the lively and infectious young woman from Master Orum's memories — Nephis was awkward, withdrawn, harsh, and difficult to deal with most of the time instead.

And yet, she too was like that. A glue that brought together people who would have never become companions otherwise.

Like Cassie, who had been destined to die on the day of the winter solstice.

She frowned.

"You say it as if your cohort was destined to fall apart without Smile of Heaven. But it didn't. You still conquered the Third Nightmare together… you became Sovereigns."

Ki Song chuckled.

"Yes. Yes, we did. But, you see… even though Smile of Heaven was gone, we still achieved all those things because of her. It was just that we weren't held together by the woman herself anymore — instead, we were held together by her ghost."

She leaned on the backrest of her throne and grew quiet for a while, as if remembering something.

Eventually, the Queen spoke somberly — or rather, one of her youthful puppets did.

"It was such a disaster, back then. We were steeling ourselves for the moment when the first Category Four Gate would open… but instead, a true calamity in the form of a Category Five Gate descended upon North America without any warning. Broken Sword was on an

expedition in the Dream Realm at that time, so by the time the news reached him, it was already too late. Immortal Flame would not stay idle, of course, and his daughter would not stay still while people were dying either."

She paused, and the other puppet continued:

"So, they led the effort to stall the Nightmare Creatures while at least some of the population was evacuated. And they died."

Ki Song leaned forward and made one of the puppets ask Cassie in an insidious voice:

"So, what do you think happened next, Song of the Fallen? What was the true inception of this war?"

Cassie hesitated.

She could guess…

"Was it… Anvil? He would have just lost his wife recently. Almost immediately after, Smile of Heaven died. His determination to turn his heart into a piece of cold steel was already slowly turning him inhuman, and these events would only make him break further. However, he was still capable of at least one emotion… resentment. He must have resented Broken Sword a great deal, for letting Smile of Heaven die. Because he had distanced himself from her hoping that Broken Sword would make her happy and keep her safe instead."

The dead youths laughed.

Once the echoes of their eerie laughter died down, Ki Song shook her head with a smile.

"A keen insight. However, Anvil was not the reason…"

Cassie frowned.

"He… wasn't?"

Ki Song shook her head.

"No. Broken Sword was."

Her smile dimmed, replaced by a cold and heartless expression.

"Because despite all reason, the fool refused to believe that Smile of Heaven had truly died. Her ghost continued to pursue us even after the woman herself was gone. That was what kept us together, pushed us forward, and allowed us to become the first human Saints."

She leaned back, an expression of melancholy appearing on her breathtakingly beautiful face.

"That… was also the root cause of all our failures. The seed from which this war was born."

Cassie frowned, confused.

"I… I don't think I understand. Neph's mom… Smile of Heaven… her soul was destroyed. She became Hollow. Why would Broken Sword believe otherwise? And why would his belief cause the war?"

Ki Song studied her for a while.

Then, she chuckled.

"The first question is easy enough to answer. You should know at least something about Smile of Heaven's Aspect, no? Her soul could wonder about, getting into all kinds of adventures. So, despite everything, Broken Sword believed that she was simply unable to find the way back to her body. That her soul was still out there, somewhere, instead of having been destroyed."

Cassie raised an eyebrow.

"That would be nearly impossible. Unless…"

The Queen nodded.

"Yes. It could have been possible if her soul got lost anywhere except America. Even if she somehow lost the way back to her body, she would not have been stranded there — she would have been immediately destroyed. Because her soul was merely Ascended, and

there were Cursed Ones devouring the continent around her. She would have been consumed, as well."

She smiled faintly.

"The only chance Smile of Heaven could be alive — an infinitely small chance — is if she somehow reached the Category Five Gate unscathed and used it to travel to the Category Five Seed it is connected to in the Dream Realm. Then challenged the Fifth Nightmare."

Cassie's eyes widened.

"You mean…"

The dead girl scoffed.

"Indeed. Broken Sword couldn't cope with the thought that his wife was dead, so he convinced himself that she was waiting for him to rescue her in the Nightmare. So… he became obsessed with the idea of challenging the Fifth Nightmare, as soon as possible."

She fell silent, and after a while, the dead boy added in a somber tone:

"And as a result, Anvil decided to kill him."

Chapter-2188: Flowers of Betrayal

Cassie remained silent for a few moments, pondering the Queen's words with a frown on her face. The truth — if it was the truth — was not exactly how Jest remembered it.

But what Ki Song had told her did not contradict what Jest remembered. Rather, it gave her perspective, allowing Cassie to slowly put together the whole picture.

Eventually, she shook her head.

"Was it not too harsh, to condemn Broken Sword simply because he hoped to save his wife? Even if that hope was entirely misguided."

The Queen studied her coldly for a while, then sighed.

"Was it? Well, maybe it was. But, you see, one has to pay a price for folly. The price is not too terrible when an ordinary person becomes misguided, but what if someone like Broken Sword loses his reason? He was the pillar of humanity, after all. So, all of humanity had to pay for his mistakes."

Ki Song leaned back and pursed her alluring lips contemptuously.

"Broken Sword… became truly obsessed with finding a way to bring Smile of Heaven back. He was not entirely in his right mind, I think, completely overcome by that longing. So, he poured all his time and energy into becoming stronger, hoping to conquer the Third and Fourth Nightmares before challenging the Fifth in time. It was to such a degree that he even neglected his newborn daughter, leaving her in the care of Immortal Flame's widow."

Cassie looked at her sharply.

Nephis had never mentioned being neglected by her father. But then again… she did not seem to have a lot of memories of him, either. She had been four when Broken Sword died, which was far too young to lose a parent — but not too young to remember them clearly, while she only remembered him vaguely.

In hindsight, it made sense. Broken Sword had become a Saint when Nephis was three — he would have spent a long time in the Nightmare, and even before that, he would have been fully engrossed in getting ready to challenge it. After all, becoming the first human Saint was not a task that could be undertaken lightly.

So, how much time would he have had to spend with his daughter? How much of that time his attention would have really been on her, instead of wandering away to more important issues?

Cassie sighed.

"Was it such a terrible desire, to challenge the Fifth Nightmare?"

The dead boy laughed.

"Cheeky girl! I see you have a habit of asking questions despite already knowing the answers."

The other puppet looked at her somberly.

"...In and of itself, the idea of challenging the Fifth Nightmare is not terrible. However, nothing exists in a vacuum. The world is a system of intricately interconnected gears, and touching one — especially one as monumental as Apotheosis — will affect countless others. But Broken Sword did not care, lost in his obsession, and could not be reasoned with. All our attempts to bring him back to his senses failed."

The Queen smiled darkly.

"To conquer the Fifth Nightmare, one has to become a deity. A lesser one, but still a god. Broken Sword wanted to become a god, but did he consider the consequences? Even if he did, he remained set in his ways. However, while challenging the Fifth Nightmare was not a terrible idea in and of itself, the consequences of conquering it were."

She shifted slightly and glanced at Seishan.

"You listen too, Seishan. Back then, the research conducted by Dr. Obel was still new, but the data he had compiled was already convincing. There seemed to be a connection between the number and power of the Awakened and the potency of the Nightmare Gates that ravaged Earth. The more of us there were, and the more power we accumulated, the faster our world spiraled toward destruction. So, a measured approach was needed… not a reckless, hasty, blind charge Broken Sword was dead set on."

Cassie looked at the Queen darkly.

"...That was why you killed him? That was why you throttled the growth of humanity, limiting the number of people who were allowed to become Saints? It was all to pace the destruction of our world?"

Ki Song let out a sigh.

"Yes… and no. We knew that Earth would inevitably be consumed by the Dream Realm. We knew that preserving the entire population was an unrealistic goal. So, we did our best to slow down the Nightmare Spell… through any means necessary, no matter how callous… and dedicated our efforts to building and developing safe havens in the Dream Realm for those few who would survive — the Citadels. However, that was not the only reason why we killed Broken Sword… or even the main one."

Cassie raised an eyebrow.

"There were more?"

She already knew the main reason, of course. However, she wanted Ki Song to confirm it.

The Queen shrugged.

"Another reason was the nature of Earth itself. Our world… is a very special place, even among the rest of the Divine Realms. War God might be dead, but the laws she set for her own Realm are still intact. She was the patron deity of humanity, after all, as well as of intellect,

technology, and progress. Therefore, her Realm was always a shelter for humans, and only humans, as well as a place where logic and reason were much firmer and more reliable than anywhere else."

Cassie opened her eyes widely. That was not something she had known before — so, she listened to Ki Song with strange intensity.

It was funny. For someone who always complained about the crushing weight of knowledge, she had long become enamored by it. Her thirst for knowledge was almost like an addiction by now.

The Queen shifted slightly on her throne.

"That is why there had never really been any true sorcery on Earth — especially not since all other realms fell. No Awakened, no Aspects, no mythical creatures… just us. That is also why ours was the last realm to be infected by the Nightmare Spell, and it will be the last one to succumb."

Chapter-2189: Conspiracy

Cassie inhaled slowly.

There were no Awakened in the Realm of War God… and therefore, it had been the last to be infected by the Nightmare Spell.

That proved that Nightmare Gates and Awakened were somehow connected, all by itself.

The question was, which came first? Had the Nightmares reached Earth, causing the Spell to descend and cause people to Awaken, or had the Spell infected Earth, bringing Nightmares in its wake?

Then again, if one was to believe late Professor Obel and his research, it was one and the same — because ripples caused by these vents spread outward in time, affecting both the past and the future.

She frowned.

"I don't see what any of this has to do with Broken Sword, though."

Ki Song smiled from her throne.

"You don't? Then think about it… Earth, the Realm of War God, is supposed to be a perfectly mundane world. Its laws prevent people from unsealing their Aspects, Awakening, and wielding sorcery. Now, what happens when the Nightmare Spell penetrates its borders and pushes humans onto the Path of Ascension?"

Cassie looked at her with a stunned expression.

"The laws… will… start to repel them?"

The Queen chuckled.

"Correct! Ah, it is a pleasure to converse with someone so sharp. Yes

— the higher you climb on the path to divinity, the more you are repelled by the laws governing our realm. It feels like the world itself is rejecting you. You might not have felt it yet as a Saint, since you exist halfway between the Dream Realm and Earth... at least not clearly. But once one becomes a Supreme, the force of rejection turns palpable. It is very difficult for us to return to the waking world, and every second we spend there is an arduous struggle against the laws that want to push us back out. The only reason we can return at all is that we possess the Will."

She paused for a moment, a wistful expression appearing on her breathtakingly beautiful face.

"That is why I spent years separated from my daughters, only able to see them in their dreams… things are better now that they have climbed the Ranks, of course, but I still have regrets. That is also why Nightmare Creatures of higher Ranks are restrained in their movements on Earth, and have not destroyed it entirely yet. Things are already this bad for us Supremes, you see. A Sacred existence, though… well, nobody knows for sure. But it is almost certain that a Sacred human won't be able to set foot on Earth at all."

Ki Song tilted her head a little.

"We were the strongest champions of humanity, all those years ago… Broken Sword, Anvil, the Dreamspawn, and I. I did not want to abandon the waking world and leave those living in it defenseless, especially not in the aftermath of what had happened in America, and Anvil was of the same mind. But Broken Sword had a different opinion. He was so insistent, so driven… impossible to dissuade. His unwillingness to slow down widened the fracture that had appeared between us when Smile of Heaven died, turning it into a divide."

She smiled somberly.

"So, you see, there were many reasons. A difference of opinion on how to protect our world best. The fear of causing a ripple that would accelerate its destruction if we went too far. The silent resentment Anvil harbored against Broken Sword, the absence of Smile of Heaven, who used to be the heart of our cohort. Oh, and of course… the most important reason of all. The most decisive one, as

well as one that could have hardly been fixed unless Broken Sword died."

Cassie already knew what it was, having learned the truth from Jest's memories. She looked at the Queen silently.

The dead youths laughed.

"...One might say that it was fate."

Cassie frowned.

"I don't believe in fate that much."

The Queen smiled.

"An amusing thing to hear, from the lips of an oracle."

Cassie matched her amused smile with a dark one of her own.

"It is because I am familiar with fate so well that I don't put much faith in it."

She hesitated for a few moments, then asked:

"So, what was the decisive reason?"

Ki Song commanded her puppets to chuckle, then leaned forward slightly and looked at her.

Her beautiful smile widened a little.

"...Why don't you ask Anvil?"

Cassie gritted her teeth, cursing inwardly.

"I obviously can't. Anymore."

The Queen studied her for a while, amusement slowly draining from her eyes. Her smile dimmed, replaced by a cold and ruthless expression.

She leaned back and let out a sigh.

"Can't you? Or are you here doing his bidding? Well, we shall see."

Ki Song remained silent for a while. Eventually, the dead girl spoke again:

"It happened immediately after we conquered the Third Nightmare, although I suspect that Anvil had been harboring his plan for much longer. Perhaps he decided to kill Broken Sword not long after America, even. Who knows that man's heart? He made a deal with the Dreamspawn first, drawing him to his side. Then, the two of them came to me."

His alluring lips twisted into a faint smile.

"I guess I was given a choice, albeit a dubious one. By then, Broken Sword had become… frighteningly powerful. Enough so that Anvil was not confident that he would be able to defeat him even with the Dreamspawn's help. He was just being meticulous, though — in truth, odds were overwhelmingly in their favor, especially since they had the element of surprise on their side. Betrayal always favors the traitors, after all."

She looked at Cassie with a wry glint in her eyes.

"If I refused to join their plot, and they succeeded in killing Broken Sword, I would have been next… actually, they would have tried to kill me first to eliminate any possibility that I would warn him. I did not deceive myself into thinking that Anvil would spare me on account of our shared past."

Ki Song chuckled, seemingly amused by her own memories.

"I was always a bit of an outsider among the members of the cohort, you see. Anvil, Smile of Heaven, and Broken Sword had always been together — they had been a team from all the way back at the Academy. The darlings of the prominent Legacy clans. But I was a person of much more humble origins, and so, they only extended a hand to me once I had proven my worth."

Chapter-2190: Broken Sword

She shook her head.

"So, Anvil would not have hesitated to discard me if I refused, camaraderie and loyalty be damned. These words did not mean much to him by that point, anyway. I could have taken Broken Sword's side at the decisive moment, I suppose — together, we would have stood a good chance against the other two. But, honestly, I saw no reason to save him. After all, there was cold logic behind Anvil's decision, distasteful as it was."

The Queen fell silent for a long time, then sighed heavily.

Her mesmerizing gaze turned to Seishan.

"What do you think, Seishan? Do you resent your mother?"

The Song princess, who had been a silent witness to the conversation until then, studied her with a somber expression.

Eventually, she shrugged.

"Well, I'm not sure. I've been known to betray men who trusted me as well. So no, I don't resent you for that."

What was left unsaid was that she did resent Ki Song for something else. It was not surprising, however… all children harbored a bit of resentment for their parents in their hearts.

Seishan had more reasons to feel that way than most. After all, she had been adopted by Ki Song as a young child without having much say in the matter. She received the lineage of Beast God without being asked. She was made a carrier of the Nightmare Spell without being given a choice to refuse, and spent a harrowing decade on the Forgotten Shore as a result.

And now, she was fighting her mother's war without being given a way out.

Cassie was sure that there were a lot of complicated emotions in Seishan's heart.

'I wonder… how come I am the only normal person around?'

No, that did not sound quite right.

Cassie did not lack self-awareness, so it was easy to admit that there was hardly a less normal person than her in the world. However, her parents and her relationship with them were both perfectly healthy and ordinary. Everyone else seemed to compete for the best childhood trauma award, though. Morgan and Mordret, Seishan and her sisters… Nephis.

Perhaps she was spending too much time around heirs of the Great Clans.

'If I survive this, I should be a better auntie to Little Ling…'

A pale smile found its way onto her lips, and she spoke quietly:

"I know someone who would resent you more."

The Queen turned away from her daughter and looked at Cassie with a hint of amusement.

"Oh… I have doubt. Little Nephie is all grown up now, isn't she? Ah… she was such a sweet child."

Her smile wilted like a flower, making her breathtakingly beautiful face look cruel and cold.

Ki Song regarded Cassie with dark indifference.

"I missed her a lot, at the start."

Cassie scoffed.

"Is that why you brought the Immortal Flame clan to ruin and sent

assassins to kill her?"

The Queen just shrugged indifferently.

"No. That was not why."

She smiled coldly.

"But why are you jumping ahead, Song of the Fallen? I rarely get the chance to reminisce about the past, so let's see… where was I? Ah, yes. Anvil and his disguised ultimatum. We joined hands, he and I — and the Dreamspawn, of course. We just became Saints back then, but Broken Sword was only growing more impatient. So, we challenged the Fourth Nightmare no more than a year later. In secret."

Her expression grew distant, and she fell silent for a while.

Eventually, a sigh escaped from her lips.

"People tend to forget us these days — partially because we erased our traces from the pages of history, and partially because there are splendid talents like you two walking the world now. But back then, decades ago… we were truly fearsome. No one had ever returned from the Third Nightmare alive, but we did. It happened more than two decades after Immortal Flame changed the world by becoming a Master, and yet, only a year after becoming Saints, we were already laying siege to the Fourth Nightmare. It seemed like nothing could stop us."

The dead boy scoffed.

"We learned a lot about the truth of the world in the Nightmare. And we learned even more about it after coming back… and about ourselves, as well. Because that was when we killed Broken Sword — out there in the darkness of the Underworld."

Cassie tilted her head, surprised.

"The Underworld?"

Ki Song nodded slowly.

"Yes. That is where the Seed of Nightmare Broken Sword had found was located, and that was where we returned to after conquering the Nightmare. The Underworld is a terrifying place, Song of the Fallen — we did not dare to explore its dark expanse back then, entering by following the Call of Nightmare and hiding from the beings that dwell in the darkness like rats."

The dead girl chuckled.

"Even as Supremes, all we could do was escape… and while we were escaping, still unfamiliar with our newfound powers, the three of us used the chance to stab Broken Sword in the back. The battle was short — in truth, I think he already knew that it would be his end. Still, even with the three of us joining forces, we weren't able to bring Broken Sword down. Ah, how fearsome he was! How valiant. We broke his body, and we broke his soul. But we couldn't break his Will."

Her eyes seemed to ignite, as if illuminated by the splendor of that wicked battle. Then, they dimmed, becoming clouded by melancholy.

Ki Song sighed.

"Still, he fell in the end. Shattered, broken, fatally wounded… he mustered what little strength he had left and fled. Deeper into the darkness, never to be seen again. That was how Broken Sword, the greatest of us, died."

Cassie held her breath.

"He… fled? You did not see him die? Then might he not have survived?"

The Queen smiled wistfully.

"Wouldn't that be interesting? But no… we killed him. I am certain of it. Because eventually, the Spell whispered of his death."

Ki Song leaned forward a little and looked at Cassie with a somber expression.

"So, now… we strangled the dire threat that Broken Sword's existence

represented before it could doom us all. And by doing so, we also arrived at the root of all our problems."

Chapter-2191: Risk Management

Cassie frowned, unable to follow the train of the Queen's thoughts.

Had she not said that the Smile of Heaven's death was the root of the war? But now, it was Broken Sword's death?

Cassie was still dazed due to having ingested Ki Song's blood. In her current state, even thinking was a difficult task.

Eventually, she forced out a pale smile.

"All your problems seemed to be solved, and you were free to shape the future as you saw fit. However, it does not look like any of you lived happily ever after."

After all, Ki Song had to have ended up as a corpse somehow.

The two puppets laughed.

The Queen nodded with a smile.

"Indeed. Well, it was to be expected… after all, how could we trust each other after betraying one of our own? What would stop us from perpetrating betrayal again? There was nothing holding us together anymore. Smile of Heaven was gone, and her ghost was gone as well, since Broken Sword had died. Anvil was wary of me — not because I was a threat, but simply because I had the potential to become a threat. And both of us were afraid of the Dreamspawn, that monster. Most importantly, we weren't really people anymore… we were entities, each responsible for a Domain."

She paused.

"Let's just say that large-scale systems are far less tolerant to risk. You can be reckless when you are only responsible for yourself… but what if you have a family to take care of? Would you allow yourself to be careless when the lives and well-being of your children are at stake? What if you are responsible for a million families? Ten million, a hundred million? Once one becomes a monarch, there's little difference between a threat and a potential threat. The mere promise of disaster is enough to take measures against the source."

The Queen looked at Cassie and Seishan with pity.

"Both of you have already tasted the burden of responsibility. But you know nothing, yet… ah, but I digress. The thing is, despite it all, we could have still worked out our differences. We even tried to remain civil, for a while. However, our attempts were destined to fail. Can you guess why?"

Seishan frowned. Cassie remained silent for a bit, then said evenly:

"Because of the Spell."

Ki Song gave her an approving smile.

"Indeed. I don't know whether it is by accident or by design, but the conflict between Supremes is woven into the very fabric of the Spell. After all, it grants us a way to grow the power of our Domains at a terrifying speed — the Citadels. However, the number of Citadels it creates is limited. So, the Domains of the carriers of the Spell must inevitably clash... it is as if it was meant to pit those who attained Supremacy against each other — so that a single, most vicious ruler was left in the end."

She lingered for a few moments.

"At first, we tried to build in peaceful coexistence. Each of us served to suppress the other… it was a circle of mutual responsibility, so to speak. The Dreamspawn held the heir of Valor hostage, Anvil had his sword hovering above my head, while I made sure that the Dreamspawn's name did not spread to too many minds. But that circle was swiftly broken. Because one who has the Will can never submit to being suppressed."

The two puppets chuckled.

"Anvil swiftly gave up on his son, almost as if he had never cared about him at all. I learned to escape the cage of my body, making the deterrent of his swords meaningless. And the Dreamspawn… the Dreamspawn secretly created a cabal of followers, making sure that his name could never be fully erased."

Ki Song leaned back and sighed.

"There was the issue of the remnants of the Immortal Flame clan, as well… you asked why we tried to eradicate them, Song of the Fallen. I will have to disappoint you, but there was no mysterious reason for it at all. It was simply cold logic — once you draw a sword against an enemy, you don't show your back to them until they are dead."

There was no compassion on her face, but no particular cruelty either. Just the cold, ruthless pragmatism that had horrified Master Orum once.

"Immortal Flame himself was dead, and both Broken Sword and Smile of Heaven had perished. Little Nephis was young and powerless… but children grow up. Sometimes, they grow up to be Saints of immense power who wield staggering influence over people's hearts and harbor a scathing desire for revenge. That was what Anvil and I both wanted to prevent from happening, so we tried to kill her before she could fully inherit the Fire. A vile decision… but a prudent one, don't you think? Considering how things ended up."

Cassie shivered.

So she knew… both of them knew. Both of them had never been fooled by Neph's act of submitting to their power.

Or maybe that was not even important. Maybe it was simply the case of large-scale systems being averse to risk, as Ki Song had put it. It did not matter whether Nephis truly harbored thoughts of revenge… all that mattered was that she had potential to.

That was all it took for these ghouls to sentence a little, orphaned girl to death.

And how many more of such deaths had there been?

'Ah… I want to kill them both with my own two hands…'

But that was not meant to be.

Cassie forced a smile onto her face.

"It seemed strange that both of you mighty Sovereigns failed to kill one powerless child."

Ki Song shrugged.

"Our hands were tied. The Dreamspawn laid a claim to her, just like he had claimed young Mordret. He has a deep interest in Divine Lineages, you know. Immortal Flame, Warden of Valor, Nightwalker, and the Dreamspawn's own mother — those were the four members of the First Generation who had found Lineage Memories. A generation later, I was the fifth. And the sixth one, well, it is obvious by now what blood flows in the veins of the Lord of Shadows… even if he doesn't bleed much."

Chapter-2192: Circle of Responsibility

The dead boy let out a quiet laugh.

The Queen shook her head.

"Whatever it is that the Dreamspawn needs from the descendants of the gods, he can only get it once their blood Awakens. Nephis is the last descendant of the Sun God lineage, and so, he prevented us from trying to eliminate her before she came of age… or rather, prevented us from trying to eliminate her too hard. The methods we could use without alerting him and provoking his ire were limited, and that was why she managed to survive. Even as a child, Nephie proved to be quite tenacious."

Cassie smiled darkly.

"...You have my sympathy. How inconvenient."

Ki Song shrugged.

"Why, thank you. It really was. However, young Nephis was really the least of our concerns. Because, as you can imagine, the mutual responsibility between us three did not last long."

Cassie inhaled deeply.

"Was there something particular that caused you to grow openly hostile to each other?"

The Queen remained silent for a bit, then smiled wryly.

"Yes? No? It was a gradual process. At first, we were busy establishing our Domains, subjugating neighboring regions of the

Dream Realm, and stabilizing our territories. But once we reached the ceiling of what we could achieve without encroaching on each other's lands, things turned much more tenuous between us. Both Anvil and I wanted to swallow the Stormsea, but neither could move without provoking the other. The Dreamspawn, meanwhile, was growing stranger with each year. The tension continued to build, until one day… we saw a chance."

Cassie raised an eyebrow.

"What chance?"

One of the youths chuckled.

"The chance to get rid of the Dreamspawn, of course. That guy, you see, aimed his attention at the moon."

Cassie blinked.

"The… moon?"

Did Ki Song mean a metaphorical moon? She carried the lineage of Beast God, after all, and one of Beast God's epithets was the Goddess of the Moon. Had Asterion shown interest in her daughters, perhaps?

They would have already reached the age of becoming susceptible to the Spell by then. Some would have even Awakened.

The Queen nodded.

"Yes, the moon. Earth's moon, to be precise — Luna. Well, not the moon itself, of course… rather, what is hidden on the moon."

'Huh…'

Cassie tried to suppress her curiosity, but failed.

"...And what, exactly, is hidden on the moon?"

The dead girl laughed melodiously.

Ki Song smiled.

"That was precisely what the Dreamspawn wanted to learn. The Nightmare Spell first infected the Lunar Colonies, you know… it was only later that it spread from the moon to the planet's surface. What had they unearthed there, on the dark side of Luna? Nobody knows. Oh, we had theories, of course. By then, it was already clear that an Unholy Nightmare Creature had made the moon its nest — that is why it is so dangerous to fly too high on Earth and why any manner of lunar observation had been forbidden. It is also one of the reasons why aviation fell into sharp decline as soon as the Nightmare Spell descended."

She lingered for a few moments.

"It is also highly likely that a Nightmare Gate is situated there… the First Gate, maybe. Since looking at the moon too closely is a recipe for disaster, we couldn't build an analog of the Obel Scale to study it. But there was still a sort of consensus about the Category of that Gate. Most of those who know believe it to be a Category Six Gate."

As Cassie drew a sharp breath, Ki Song looked up and smiled.

"If so, it is connected to a Seed of the Sixth Nightmare… the final Nightmare. One that would turn those who conquer it Divine, thus giving birth to gods. Not lesser deities of the Sacred Rank, but true gods — no different from those great beings who once ruled all existence."

She hesitated for a moment, then added in a more reserved tone:

"Of course, there is a smaller group that holds a different opinion. They believe that the Lunar Gate leads to a Seed that is even more special. Not just a Seed of Nightmare, no… instead, they believe it to be the Seed of the Nightmare Spell. The source of its invasion into our reality."

Cassie exhaled slowly.

'The world still holds so many mysteries…'

An Unholy One was dwelling on the moon, guarding the Gate to the Final Nightmare… or the source of the Nightmare Spell itself. Who

would have thought?

The magnitude of this revelation had left her breathless.

Cassie was too tiny and insignificant for that information to have any direct importance to her, just like an ant was too tiny and short-lived to worry about the movement of tectonic plates.

But still, still…

She could not help but shiver, knowing that the moon had been there, high above her, throughout countless nights.

Ki Song smiled softly.

"If you live long enough to become Supremes yourselves one day, you'll hear it… on a quiet night, under the familiar sky, you'll hear the distant, alluring, irresistible call of that Nightmare. Its Call is another reason why we don't return to the waking world that often."

She remained silent for a little while, then sighed.

"In any case… the Dreamspawn grew intrigued by the moon, and so, he endeavored to visit it. And using the chance, Anvil and I made sure that he never returned. We massacred his followers and erased his name from the network, from the culture, from the annals of history, forbade the government to ever mention him again, and killed everyone who had ever met him face-to-face — well, most of them, at least."

A wicked smile twisted her alluring lips.

"There were no Citadels under his control, and we had hidden our existence — the existence of the Sovereigns — from the very beginning to limit the spread of his fame, and therefore of his Domain… even if it forced all three of us into the shadows. So, his Domain crumbled in an instant, and he was stranded on the moon, his power severely diminished. We had hoped that he would die there, but of course, we weren't that lucky. That fiend still draws breath out there, in the coldness of space, looking at us from above. He can even exert his influence somewhat, sometimes, albeit not too much of it."

Her smile widened.

"And with the Dreamspawn mostly removed from the picture, the circle of mutual responsibility was broken. Anvil's sword pierced my heart… but, of course, I refused to die. That was how our clandestine clash began. From that day forward, we were gathering forces, positioning valuable game pieces, and preparing for the war — for the final confrontation to see which one of us was the most vicious, and therefore worthy of becoming the sole ruler of the world."

Chapter-2193: Greater Good

Cassie remained silent for a while, struggling against the nauseating feeling of not being in full control of her body and soul. Her torn cheek throbbed with dull pain, and drops of blood glistened coldly on the stone floor.

'She… doesn't seem quite human, anymore.'

The beautiful corpse in front of her looked like Ki Song and sounded like Ki Song, but while there was some resemblance — a deeply hidden sameness — the young woman she had seen in the memories of Master Orum was mostly gone.

As if she was not a living being, but a wraith sustained by unbreakable Will.

Both of them didn't seem human, really — the King and the Queen.

Ki Song was dead, and did not have a heartbeat. But while Anvil was undeniably alive, his unfeeling heart was colder than that of a corpse.

They looked human, but the way they thought was not human. There was a limit to how callous one could be, how heartless one could be. There were limits that no person could cross without becoming a mindless beast.

But then again, the Sovereigns were not supposed to be completely human.

'Is it because they are Ki Song and Anvil of Valor, or because they are Supreme?'

Supreme beings were demigods in quite a literal sense. Saints like Cassie herself were called demigods, as well, but while they did possess some qualities of the divine, having transcended mortal

limits, that title had mostly come from human fancy.

To mundane people, the powers Saints wielded seemed godly, and so, the Saints had been dubbed demigods.

And even though that title was mostly a metaphor, Cassie could already feel how her sense of self was changing.

She had lived the memories of countless people, and perceived the world from countless points of view. She had experienced being men and women, young and old, healthy and sick — she had experienced the lives of soldiers and warriors, factory workers, lofty Legacies, destitute refugees, actors, artisans, politicians, housewives, criminals, servants, laborers… and so many more.

What kind of person could possess a lifetime's worth of greatly varied experiences and remain the same?

Several lifetimes?

Naturally, her worldview had changed.

And she was merely a Saint…

How would she change if she became Supreme — a demigod whose conscience had to be vast enough to encompass an entire realm? How much of her former self would remain?

How much of her humanity would be discarded to make space for divinity?

She sighed, then faced Ki Song with a grim expression.

"...To what end?"

Cassie gritted her teeth.

"You and Avil have spent two decades ruling the world. You created the Great Clans, shaped the Legacy caste into what it is today, conquered vast lands in the Dream Realm. You have suppressed the number of emerging Saints, ruthlessly eliminated all who dared to disobey you, and maintained a semblance of order in the waking

world. When you could not hold the Nightmare Spell back anymore, you finally revealed your claws in Antarctica. And now, you are at war. To what end?"

She hesitated for a moment.

"Is it simply to become the strongest a Supreme can be? To spread your Domain to all of humanity? Why? What are you after? Do you lust for more power? Do you want to resolve those old, unforgivable grudges? Are you preparing to challenge the Fifth Nightmare and become Sacred? Have you given up? Why, why have you done all of this?"

Ki Song looked at her calmly from the throne.

A faint smile illuminated her breathtaking face.

"Why… it's for the greater good, of course."

Cassie couldn't help but let out a scoff.

"The greater good?"

The Queen nodded.

"Our goal is to preserve humanity, as it has always been. You can disagree with our method… despise them, even… but do not doubt our intentions. Everything we did, we did to build a better world for those who would follow in our footsteps."

Ki Song let out a sigh.

"To answer your question… the war is necessary because Anvil and I are much too weak."

Her puppets chuckled.

"Our power, great as it might seem, is woefully insufficient. Our Domains are incomplete. Our strength is lacking. We are nearly immortal and have no rivals among the human population, but the enemies we face aren't human either. They are the true rulers of the Dream Realm — the old, corrupted deities who dwell in the darkest

corners of this cursed world."

Ki Song leaned forward a little, smiling faintly.

"There is a simple equation to safeguarding the future of humanity, you see. In this dire world, humanity has no luxury to afford itself things that it does not need. It is a luxury to have a population of three billion people, but is it necessary? Can we save them all? No... spreading our forces too thin will only result in total annihilation. Meanwhile, humanity can survive with far less. The ones whom we have brought from the Chain of Nightmares will do — it is a large enough pool to produce Awakened at a sufficient rate, who will produce enough Masters and Saints in turn. In fact, it is already too large."

Her smile turned somber.

"More than a hundred million mundane people are in the Song Domain right now. All of them need to be fed, clothed, sheltered, and protected from the Nightmare Creatures. We had been preparing the human enclaves in the Dream Realm for more than a decade, and yet the burden of caring for so many people is already straining every possible resource we have, shaking the entire kingdom. The infrastructure is on the verge of collapse, the supplies are dwindling…"

Cassie frowned.

"Those people are not just sitting idly. They are working the fields, building the roads… they are volunteering to face the Fist Nightmare and become Awakened, as well. In a few more years, they will feed, clothe, shelter, and protect themselves."

Ki Song shook his head.

"But the situation on Earth will also become far less stable in a few years, which means that we won't be able to deliver as many supplies through the Dream Gate. But, suppose you are right… even then, the waking world will continue to deteriorate at ever-increasing speed. Soon enough, it will be consumed entirely, and the entire Dream Realm will change. Its geography will be rewritten, and countless

Nightmare Creatures will start a great migration. We will be besieged from all sides, and the Death Zones will spill from their borders, threatening to drown the human nation we have so laboriously established."

The Queen smiled darkly.

"When that happens, neither the Song Domain nor the Sword Domain will be able to survive. However, the Human Domain — one kingdom united under the torn, patchwork heaven of the Dream Realm by one Supreme — might just stand a chance."

Chapter-2194: Price of Divinity

Ki Song inhaled deeply — or pretended to, at least — and leaned back.

"As for conquering the Fifth Nightmare… even if we have such an ambition, neither of us dares. Challenging a Nightmare is always a gamble, after all — maybe the challenger will return alive, maybe not. Immortal Flame could risk his life because there were countless Awakened in the world beside him. Warden and Nightwalker could risk theirs because, by then, there were plenty of Masters around. But what about us? What happens if all Supremes of humanity perish together, leaving no one to defend it against the tyranny of the Nightmare Spell? The risk is too great, and the responsibility we bear is too great to take it."

Her expression changed subtly.

"More than that, each Nightmare is different from the previous one. We have no knowledge about what awaits us in the Fifth. What we do know, however… is that even if one manages to conquer it, there will be a price to pay. A Sacred being won't be able to enter the waking world at all, most likely, meaning that there won't be Dream Gates to lead people away either. Even if Sacred carriers of the Nightmare Spell receive an ability to create a new kind of connection between the two worlds, there is also the nature of the Apotheosis itself to consider. Becoming a god… is not merely about one's Rank."

Ki Song paused briefly and continued in a neutral tone:

"The difference between a Transcendent and a Supreme is vast. However, the difference between a mortal and a god is immeasurable. Becoming a Sacred being means leaving what little remains of your human nature behind. Once one experiences Apotheosis, the way they think will change. The way they feel will change. The way they are will change, and who they are will change

as well. Power and benevolence do not always go hand-in-hand… who knows if a Sacred being can even be entrusted with humanity? Heavens know I dread the thought of the Dreamspawn becoming a god. Anvil, as well… and I fear myself most of all."

The Queen remained silent for a while, then looked at Seishan hesitantly.

Her lips moved slightly, and a new voice — Ki Song's own voice — resounded in the throne room for the first time.

It was low and beautiful, making one want to never stop hearing it.

"Will I still care about my daughters? Will I even be capable of human affection? Will I remain… myself? Or will I become someone else — something else, rather. A being whose very nature is divine, and thus inhuman."

Seishan trembled.

The Queen's words sounded eerily similar to what Cassie herself had been considering earlier, and they resounded strongly.

Because Cassie herself was deathly afraid of losing herself to the power of her Aspect. Countless fragments of her past were already lost, and so, she dreaded losing even more of her present self… but she was afraid of her future self most of all.

Everyone feared death, and transformation, especially one as thorough as becoming a deity — Apotheosis, as Ki Song had called it — was a form of death as well.

Cassie took a deep breath.

"So, in the end… the two of you started this war to consume each other and give birth to an immensely powerful Domain — one that unites all of humanity — as a result. The part of humanity that you had deemed worthy of saving, at least."

Ki Song shrugged.

She had grown silent again, and her puppets spoke in her stead:

"Yes. Something like that."

Cassie shook her head.

"All these deaths, all this suffering… wouldn't it have been easier if one of you simply stepped down and allowed the other to rule unopposed?"

A strange smile twisted the Queen's alluring lips.

"I suppose it would have. But ask yourself this question… will someone who is willing to give up without a fight be capable of standing up against the entire world? Will someone who is willing to submit without a struggle be worthy of ruling over all of humanity? Will someone like that be able to lead anyone, let alone everyone, to salvation? No… it is not in the nature of a Sovereign to surrender. The very quality that made us Supreme makes it impossible for us to capitulate without a thorough battle."

There was a long stretch of silence, and then, the dead youths laughed.

"Well… I seem to have answered all of your question, Song of the Fallen. How's that? Was that enough for a barter?"

Cassie lowered her head.

"...It's plenty, Your Majesty."

Ki Song nodded with a hint of amusement.

"I've shown you plenty of grace, then. What do I get in exchange?"

Cassie gathered her thoughts while inhaling deeply.

'Here it goes, then.'

Things would start happening fast once she opened her mouth. But that was the best course of action…

The Sovereigns had to be somewhat equal in strength when they clashed. And at the moment, the King of Swords was holding too big

of an advantage.

She sighed.

"I mentioned knowing a lot of secrets, one of which is especially valuable. I'll share it with you as gratitude for showing me grace."

Straightening her back, Cassie lingered for a moment and then said in a somber tone:

"The King has secretly carved a path through the Hollows of the Breastbone and the Western First Rib. His troops will soon emerge from the jungle and attack the Lesser Stronghold Crossing from the rear — it will happen by the end of tomorrow, or perhaps even sooner. Now that Valor wants me dead, my life is tied to the well-being of the Song clan. So, I thought I'd let you know."

A heavy silence settled in the throne room. Seishan seemed startled, her eyes widening slightly… the Queen, however, remained composed.

A few moments later, she leaned forward a little.

"...Weren't there a Cursed Tyrant barring the path to the Hollows of the First Rib?"

Cassie lowered her head.

"There was. The King killed it."

Ki Song raised an eyebrow.

"He killed a Cursed Tyrant swiftly and quietly enough for its death to go unnoticed? Ah… how curious."

She remained motionless for a while.

And then smiled.

"Well. That certainly changes things…"

Chapter-2195: Dollhouse

The Queen remained silent for a few moments, looking into the distance.

Cassie could not really imagine what was going on in her head. It had to be hard to be a general who had been driven into a hopeless situation. The Song Army was already at a great disadvantage, driven back to the western part of the Collarbone Plain and besieged.

The only hope of salvaging the situation and restoring a semblance of balance to the war was to hold out long enough for Revel to conquer the Citadel in the spine of the dead god… and for Mordret to take Bastion.

But now, even that hope had been shattered.

If Ki Song was troubled, though, she did not show it.

Instead, she lowered her gaze and peered at Cassie.

"Well, well. The secret you told me is indeed valuable, young Cassia."

The dead boy fell silent. His counterpart, meanwhile, spoke in a clear voice:

"You have my gratitude. It is time for you to depart, though… go and rest, for a little while. Seishan, please stay."

Cassie wondered briefly if she would really be allowed to walk out the throne room on her own two feet without being escorted by Seishan. That… would be problematic, actually, since her Aspect was suppressed. Was she supposed to bump into the walls of the Song keep blindly until she found a place to rest?

A few moments later, though, her hesitation was dispelled in the

most disturbing way. Her body moved on its own, rising from its knees and performing an elegant bow. Her mouth moved on its own, as well, and words she had not meant to say left her lips:

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

Then, her body turned around and headed away from the throne with graceful, confident steps. The tenuous connection she had established to Seishan's senses was cut, and she was left in the darkness.

Cassie was blind once again… but her body behaved as if it could see. It left the throne room and walked somewhere calmly, taking turns when needed and using her hands to open doors. She did not know where the body was headed, and could only memorize the number of turns and count the steps in her mind out of habit.

As Cassie walked, she escaped from the horror of not being able to control her own body into thinking about the many mysteries that had been solved today, and the many secrets that had been revealed to her by the Queen.

'It is all starting to take shape.'

So what had she learned?

First of all, many of the fragmented and unreliable pieces of information they had collected from dubious sources were now confirmed. The grand plan of the Sovereigns, the purpose of suppressing the emergence of independent Saints, the reason why the Supremes had seemingly abandoned the waking world…

One of the more interesting things she had learned was the reason why the Sovereigns had chosen to hide their existence and rule from the shadows. Cassie had assumed that it was simply due to… to the general shadiness of the Great Clans. Honestly, she had never thought about it deeply.

But as it turned out, it was a premeditated measure to prevent Asterion from growing too powerful instead. Ki Song had not explained what powers the third Sovereign possessed, and how his Domain spread. However, Cassie was able to surmise that it had

something to do with people simply knowing about his existence — and especially knowing his name.

There was the tidbit about the special nature of War God's Realm, as well. And… the startling truth of what was hidden on the moon.

But while quite curious, these pieces of information were not important at the moment.

What was important was the story of Broken Sword's death, the reasons why he had been killed, and the background of the downfall of the Immortal Flame clan.

If for no other reason than a personal one.

'I will have to tell Neph.'

Ki Song did not mention the final straw that had pushed Anvil on the path of no return, but Cassie already learned it from Jest. How would Nephis react? Something like that… did not excuse the vile actions of the Sovereigns. But it did put them into an entirely new perspective.

And that perspective was one of the most important cornerstones of Neph's entire being.

Cassie sighed… or rather, tried to. However, her body was still moving on its own, indifferent to her commands.

Soon enough, the coldness of the Queen's residence receded, and Cassie felt the heat of Godgrave on her skin again. She was surrounded by the sounds of the army camp again. She could smell life again.

It seemed that she was standing in front of the gates of the keep, waiting for something.

Her cheek was still throbbing with pain, and her mind was on fire, feverishly going over all the stark revelations she had received.

But most of all…

Cassie was genuinely surprised.

'I wasn't even tortured.'

She exhaled slowly.

Well, the day was still young… and there were more such days in front of her, as well.

Now that her audience with the Queen had come to an end, Ki Song seemed to have released the strings binding Cassie's body like a marionette, somewhat — enough to cut her some slack, at least.

She was still in that dizzying state of not being entirely in control of her own body. In fact, she was barely able to move — just enough to change her posture, but not enough to take a step.

Her Aspect, too, remained almost entirely sealed.

Cassie remained motionless for a few moments, then shook her head subtly.

There was no way of knowing if Sunny was somewhere near, but she believed that he was. In fact, he had most likely been keeping an eye on her from the moment she entered the Greater Crossing Stronghold… just not in the chambers of the Queen.

If so, she had to prevent him from trying to contact her. Now that Cassie had become a partial puppet, approaching her was tantamount to revealing his presence to Ki Song.

So, she hoped that he had seen and understood her signal.

Sunny was both observant and smart. He would know that it was dangerous to contact her, and stay away.

Still…

Even unable to see or hear him, Cassie was glad to know that she was not truly alone.

Chapter-2196: Truth and Fortune

Back in the throne room, Seshan took a step forward and stood in the spot where Cassie had previously kneeled. She did not lower herself, though, remaining upright as she looked up at her mother.

The Queen regarded her with a distant expression. After a while, she sighed.

"I think you have an idea of what has to be done now."

Seishan nodded curtly.

"I do, mother."

Ki Song looked at her and smiled wryly.

"Don't try to fool me with that refined expression, girl. You have not changed at all since you were little like a mouse… come, out with it. I can see that you have questions. Was what I said so surprising?"

Seishan hesitated for a few moments, then bowed slightly and said in a reserved tone:

"Then, I will ask. I do have questions… two of them, to be precise."

The Queen just waited silently. Seishan raised her head and looked at her mother with a hint of a somber emotion in her eyes.

"You said that Changing Star had to be dealt with… for no other reason but cold logic. That you would not leave the child of your enemy alive, knowing that they could return to seek revenge one day. Was that true?"

Ki Song raised an eyebrow.

"You should have been aware of our past efforts to erase the Immortal Flame clan from existence for a while now. Ah, I see… it's not the deed itself that sparked your curiosity, but the motivation. Well, I suppose it is true. Granted, I don't have a habit of going around disposing of children. It is not every enemy that has to be erased without a trace."

She sighed.

"...But little Nephis was. Because she was the daughter of Broken Sword and Smile of Heaven, the heir of Immortal Flame — a child like that would never have grown up to be a nobody. It was too dangerous to leave her be."

Seishan remained silent for a while. Then, she asked in an even tone:

"So, will I and my sisters be disposed of for the same reason, should you fall in the battle against the King of Swords?"

The dead youths laughed, and Ki Song herself smiled in amusement.

"Why? Don't you have faith in your mother?"

Seishan lingered with the answer.

In the end, she looked at the Queen with a steadfast expression.

"I do... I believe that you will win."

Ki Song chuckled.

"Why?"

Seishan frowned and stayed quiet for a few moments. Then, she said evenly:

"Because we are of the Song clan. The King of Swords received his kingdom and his Lineage from others… but you earned them yourself. He had everything, while you rose from nothing. You clawed and fought, struggling to gain every little piece of what he had been given freely. He is arrogant, while you are cautious. But most of all…"

She paused for a moment.

"You have too many things to lose, while he has nothing. He has nothing to protect, because he has already lost everything… and so, he only has resolve — not desire. He doesn't want to win. But you want it desperately."

The dead youths laughed quietly.

"So… you are calling your mother desperate?"

Seishan's expression changed slightly.

"That was… was not what I meant."

The puppets laughed again, while Ki Song shook her head.

"No. You are correct, my wise daughter. That man has the Will… but he does not have anything except the Will. Deep down, he doesn't really care to win — he doesn't care about anything. A man who has nothing to lose is dangerous, but he is also pitiful."

She shook her head lightly.

"But you are also wrong, thinking that I achieved everything myself. That I have had no help, and wasn't given anything by anyone. In fact, I have received many gifts… my mother's love, the kindness of strangers, the faith and loyalty of those who followed me, the care of my daughters. It was just that I was young and naive back then, full of resentment and anger. That was how I became ruthless enough to survive this world, and therefore lived long enough to wisen up and recognize my fortune. While Anvil… that poor man was far less fortunate than me."

She sighed and looked away.

"Isn't it funny? I am a descendant of Beast God, the goddess of the cycle of death and rebirth — and yet, I am unable to give birth, and neither can I die. Meanwhile, Anvil is a descendant of War God, the goddess of life. And yet, he has turned himself into a living corpse. What bitter irony is this?"

Ki Song lingered for a while, then turned to Seishan.

"You had another question, didn't you?"

Seishan nodded.

"Yes."

She waited a little, then asked hesitantly:

"Back then… why did you agree to answer Cassia's questions? You did not need to."

The Queen smiled softly and looked away, Her puppets did not speak for a while, but eventually, one of them answered in a slightly wistful tone:

"Her True Name is Song of the Fallen. The Names are an expression of one's personal truth, as well as of their fate. Her fate is to be a witness… to remember. So…"

Ki Song lingered for a moment.

"History is written by the victors, Seishan. No matter who wins this war, the truth of what happened will be weaponized and twisted. But I wanted someone to remember the truth — my truth, at least — in its purest form, no matter what comes next. Even if it is just one person. Forgive your mother this little bit of indulgence… but I wanted to be witnessed."

Seishan remained silent.

Eventually, she nodded.

"I understand."

Ki Song let out a long sigh.

"In that case…"

Her expression changed, becoming cold and regal. She straightened on her throne, and her beautiful figure suddenly seemed towering

and overbearing.

The dead youths spoke solemnly:

"Seishan of Clan Song. Listen to your Queen's command…"

Chapter-2197: Boiling Pot

Rain did not get a good look at the prisoner Saint Seishan was supposedly escorting. She did glimpse the beautiful princess herself, whose presence was just as soothing as always — however, there was an eerie escort of empty-eyed pilgrims in the way, so it was hard to see who had been captured by the Queen's daughter.

Rain stayed in the shadows, leaning on the wall of an armory among other idle soldiers. Her brother remained silent until the strange prisoner convoy disappeared from view, heading toward the stone keep where the Queen herself was rumored to reside.

Then, he suddenly separated himself from her shadow.

"I'll go snoop around a little. Don't get into any trouble while I am away."

Rain scoffed.

"Who am I, a kid? Why would I get into trouble?"

He remained silent for a few moments, then said in a dubious tone:

"Yeah…"

With that, the shadow stealthily glided away.

Rain sighed, then stretched her tired body and went about her business. She spent some time getting the water rations and refilled the Green Canteen, then waited some more to get an allotment of synthetic firewood for their campfire.

Finally, she returned to the part of the camp assigned to the Seventh Royal Legion and found her cohort. They made a fire, igniting it with a Memory, and boiled some water to brew powdered coffee — the

mostly empty can of it was a luxury Ray had won from an officer in a game of cards. After that, they put a pot over the fire to prepare the usual Song Army stew.

Rain stared at the stamped tinfoil wrappers left from the bricks of synthetic firewood absent-mindedly as the wind dragged them across the surface of the dead god's bone. The contrast of the mundane and the mystical was pretty evocative… she was just not sure of what.

Eventually, she sighed and looked at Tamar.

"I saw Princess Seishan while I was getting water."

Tamar just stared at the fire.

"Oh."

The Saint of Sorrow had said that he would speak to the princess once she returned to the camp. So, they would probably leave this dreadful place soon.

Rain felt… conflicted about the prospect. Sure, she wanted nothing more than for the horror to end. But on the other hand, she felt terrible about leaving her fellow soldiers behind and escaping to safety simply because her friend had some connections at the top.

Not everyone had a Transcendent father. What was going to happen to countless young soldiers who did not?

She had a pretty good idea what would happen to them — thousands of them, at least — and was not sure what would haunt her more. Would it be the harrowing siege, or the act of running away like a coward?

'That is how they get you.'

The other members of the cohort seemed to be struggling with the same thoughts, so no one said anything for a long time. However, their silence was an answer in and of itself. In the end, self-preservation seemed to be winning over the misguided sense of devotion.

Well, it was not too surprising. Many people had been idealists when they joined the Song Army. But after experiencing the horrors of war, their worldview irrevocably changed, and their hearts changed as well… devotion was a scarce currency in Godgrave these days. At least devotion to the symbols that had failed them, and to the leaders who had led them to hell.

Rain and her friends had already fought and bled plenty for the Song Domain. Did they really have to insist on staying when someone was telling… ordering them to leave?

She was still drowning in doubt, and the stew was still bubbling in the pot when there seemed to be some kind of commotion around them. Looking up, Rain noticed that there was more movement in the vast courtyard of the Greater Crossing Stronghold than usual.

The entire camp seemed to be boiling, not much different from the stew.

'Huh? Is there going to be another assault?'

That did not make much sense. The battle had just ended recently, and even if the Sword Army decided to attack twice in one day, it would not have caused so much activity. Those who had to man the wall were already on the ramparts, after all, since the entire contingent worked to defend the fortress in shifts.

'What is going on?'

Just as Rain thought that, Tamar caught a soldier who was running by and asked in an incredulous tone:

"What is happening?"

He looked at her with wide eyes.

"W—what? Lady Tamar, you haven't heard?"

The Seventh Royal Legion had suffered grave casualties in the siege — just like every other legion of the Song Army — so there were gaping holes in the chain of command. New orders did not travel to the rank and file as fast as they used to.

Granted, Tamar was an officer, so it was a bit strange that she was caught out of the loop.

"Heard what?"

The soldier stared at her dazedly for a few moments.

He seemed to be both excited and terrified… but mostly terrified.

Eventually, he took a deep breath and said loudly, a feverish glint appearing in his eyes.

"An attack! We are attacking!"

Tamar frowned, then asked while putting an emphasis on the word "we":

"What… what do you mean we are attacking?"

He grinned darkly.

"It's just as I said! The order has just come down from the Queen. We are abandoning the fortress, crossing the chasm, and storming the camp of the Sword Army — all legions, all auxiliary troops, even the Saints. It's an all-out offensive!"

Tamar let the soldier go, stunned. He hurried away, soon disappearing from view.

Rain, Tamar, Ray, and Fleur looked at each other.

Eventually, Ray opened his mouth and said in a shaky voice:

"So… I guess we're not becoming caravan guards anymore?"

Rain pursed her lips.

"The order seems to have been given almost immediately after Princess Seishan returned. So, the Saint of Sorrow might not have had the opportunity to settle things with her yet. Or he did, but the transfer got lost in the chaos. In any case, if we want to leave… we still can."

Storming the siege camp of the Sword Army… an all-out offensive… Saints joining the fight.

Crazy! It seemed crazy!

'What the hell is the Queen thinking?'

Rain looked at Tamar.

"So, do we want to leave?"

Tamar met her gaze expressionlessly.

She remained silent for a few moments, then said in an even tone:

"I did not receive the transfer order. So, I intend to stay."

Rain sighed.

Well, of course. She would.

'Damn Legacies…'

Shaking her head, she turned her head and looked at the bubbling stew with regret.

"What are we standing around for, then? We need to start gathering our things. Even if we are going to be marching into battle instead of running away, we're still abandoning camp. So get your stuff quickly!"

…Some time later, her brother snuck back into her shadow. He settled inside of it, remained silent for a bit, and then asked incredulously:

"Did I not say to stay out of trouble?"

Rain raised an eyebrow.

"I did, though?"

He sighed.

"Look around."

All around them, the Sword Army was seething and boiling as it prepared to go into battle… perhaps the final battle of this hellish war. The legions were assembling into marching columns, the enthralled Nightmare Creatures were roaring in frenzy, and the Saints were summoning their battle Memories, ready to lead the charge.

Her brother inhaled slowly, then growled:

"...That looks like trouble to me!"

Chapter-2198: Divide and Conquer

Just a handful of minutes before, Sunny was standing at the edge of the Ivory Island, looking at the distant wall of the great fortress with a somber expression on his face. His incarnation in the camp of the Song Army had caught a glimpse of Cassie as she was being escorted by Seishan and their eerie retinue of walking corpses…

But he had lost sight of them once the two entered the chambers of the Queen. Sunny was not reckless enough to get that close to Ki Song, so he was forced to wait in tense anticipation, not knowing what to expect.

Surely, Cassie was too valuable to be disposed of swiftly. She was not someone who would put herself in danger without having a way out, either… so his worry was most likely meaningless. And yet, he could not help but feel uneasy.

'Damn it.'

Eventually, Cassie emerged from the heavy gates and remained standing outside, motionless and silent. There were fresh cuts on her cheek, but it did not seem like she was hurt badly. The lack of an escort was also telling, hinting that she had come to some sort of understanding with the Queen.

Or that the Queen simply did not deem it necessary to guard her, confident that Cassie would not be able to escape.

The mental communication Sunny had grown used to did not seem to work, so he wanted to approach the blind seer stealthily in the form of a shadow to exchange a few audible words. However, she shook her head lightly, which had to be a signal to stay away.

Tense and unhappy, Sunny retreated.

And not long after that, the camp of the Song Army came alive like a massive beast awakening from slumber.

The sudden commotion was on such a grand scale that even Master Sunless could see that something was going on in the Greater Crossing Stronghold, all the way from the Ivory Island.

He frowned.

"Are they preparing to retreat?"

Cassie could have informed Ki Song about the clandestine plan to attack the Lesser Crossing Stronghold from the rear — in fact, she had a good reason to. If so, the main contingent of the Song Army serving as the garrison of the Greater Crossing would have to retreat or risk being cut off from the base camp and surrounded by the forces of the Sword Domain.

They could even make a desperate attempt to reinforce the Lesser Crossing and prevent it from falling…

But that was not what Ki Song had decided to do.

When Sunny's incarnation learned what the Queen was planning a few moments later, he could not help but falter for a moment.

Master Sunless opened his eyes wide.

"...Crazy!"

Everyone had expected that Ki Song would retreat.

But against all odds, she decided to attack instead.

She was preparing to abandon the Greater Crossing Stronghold and throw all her available forces into an all-out offensive, threatening to break the main contingent of the Sword Army in one fell swoop.

Why would she surrender the overwhelming defensive advantage the Song Army held and command her soldiers to attack, even knowing

how desperate her position was? Was she insane or a genius?

Sunny suddenly felt cold sweat rolling down his back.

In hindsight… why wouldn't she attack?

Retreating would only buy the Song Army some time — granted, time was what they lacked the most — but it would not change the overall situation of the war by much.

However, now that she knew that Anvil had secretly left the siege camp and was leading soldiers through the Hollows, she would also know that the siege camp was not as impossible to overtake as everyone seemed to believe. As far as she was informed, the Lord of Shadows was also far away.

So, the greatest obstacle in her way was Nephis.

Nephis had proven that she was an impossible existence among those of the Transcendent Rank, and therefore, no Saint in the Song Army could defeat her. If the Queen wanted to destroy the siege camp, she would have to take to the battlefield herself — which she could not do, not yet.

Or rather, there had not been any other way to suppress Nephis before.

There was one now, though.

Cursing, Sunny dove into the shadows and stepped out of them at the top of the Ivory Tower. Nephis was already walking toward the balcony, a cold expression on her face.

"Cassie! She's…"

Nephis nodded.

"I know."

She paused for a moment near him, hesitated a little, and then said casually:

"Stay here, please. Make sure that your assistant, Aiko, remains in the Brilliant Emporium as well. I don't know what will happen next, but… it can get messy."

Sunny chewed on his lip, unhappy.

But it was not time to discard the persona of Master Sunless yet. Plus, if anything that disagreed with him happened, he would only be a step away. His senses could envelop the entire battlefield, after all, and there was one more of his incarnations on the other side of the chasm.

He sighed.

"Take one of my shadows with you, at least."

As he said the words, the gloomy shadow separated from his feet and dove into Neph's own shadow… looking quite smug and satisfied as it did, at that.

Nephis lingered for a moment, then smiled faintly.

"Thank you, Master Sunless."

Leaning forward, she planted a soft kiss on his cheek, and then turned around.

Brilliant light surrounded her slender figure, forming into the image of two incandescent wings. A moment later, she leapt over the parapet of the balcony and plummeted down, toward the siege camp of the Sword Army.

Left alone under the radiant sky, Sunny touched his cheek and looked into the distance.

A quiet sigh escaped from his lips.

"...Stay safe, Lady Nephis."

The drums of war were beating, and she had to lead her soldiers into battle.

That battle was not going to be an easy one, it seemed.

Worse still, the battles that would follow it were only going to be so much harder...

Chapter-2199: From the Ashes

Setting an entire army into motion was not an easy task. As Sunny watched somberly from high above, the siege camp slowly became consumed by feverish activity.

The soldiers were tired, having only recently returned from a bloody and fruitless assault on the impregnable walls of the great fortress. They wanted nothing more than to crawl into their tents and rest their weary bodies, surrendering to the fleeting and merciful escape of oblivion for a short while.

The Awakened slept without seeing dreams, while Masters suffered in the embrace of nightmares.

Instead of being given an opportunity to rest, though, they were being stirred awake and told to prepare for another battle. This time, it was not another dreadful assault… instead, the enemy was supposedly coming over the chasm to attack.

The groggy soldiers could not make any sense of it. Why would the Song Army abandon its cursed fortress? The Greater Crossing Stronghold had become a dark symbol of death for the soldiers of the Sword Army, so they failed to imagine that the enemy would give up on the protection of its walls.

Surely, there had been some mistake…

But as they slowly came to their senses and realized the severity of the situation, their confusion was replaced with dread.

Soon enough, the siege camp was boiling. The soldiers were assembling into units, and the units were trying to move into formation…

But they were already far behind the Song Army, which seemed to be

ready to march.

"...What are they doing?"

Most of the Fire Keepers were boarding the Chain Breaker, ready to join Nephis on the ground, while some remained on the Ivory Island to defend it should Beastmaster and her winged thralls stage another aerial attack. However, Aiko was entirely idle, keeping Sunny company as they observed the two armies from above.

Sunny frowned, unsure how to answer. He was confused as well.

"It seems like… they're dismantling the ramparts."

Indeed, the walls of the Greater Crossing Stronghold, which had endured countless assaults and remained unbroken, were slowly crumbling in the distance.

One section quaked, and then collapsed, followed by another. The soldiers swarmed over the wooden debris, appearing no larger than ants. Gaping holes were slowly forming in the once impenetrable shield of the Greater Crossing.

Sunny was darkly fascinated by the view.

He had seen so many people die trying to take these walls, and now, they were being destroyed from within by those who had spilled rivers of blood trying to defend them.

'Why would they take down the walls?'

He wanted to say something else, but at that moment, something else stole his attention.

Looking into the darkness of the abyssal chasm separating the breastbone and the collarbone of the dead god, Sunny scowled deeply. A cold shiver ran down his spine.

Something was moving there, far below… rising from under the ash.

"Crap."

His eyes widened a little.

Aiko looked at him in confusion and opened her mouth to say something, but Sunny interrupted her in a tone that lacked his usual levity:

"Go back, Aiko. Lock yourself inside the Brilliant Emporium and don't come out until I come get you."

She flinched, surprised by the unfamiliar tone.

After sparing him a long look, Aiko wordlessly turned around and shot toward the Mimic, her feet hovering slightly above the grass.

The Fire Keepers preparing the Chain Breaker for the journey down seemed to have felt something, as well. A few of them grew motionless on the deck, turning to look in the direction of the great fortress.

The troops were still trying to assemble into a battle formation down on the ground, and their movements grew even more urgent.

A cold gust of wind blew across the Greater Crossing, bringing with it the smell of ash and the stench of rotting flesh.

Sunny's expression became grim.

Then, a moment later, something emerged from the darkness of the chasm.

At first, it seemed like a thick vine — no different from the tendrils that the abominable jungle sprouted to crawl to the surface from the dim twilight of the Hollows. However, this one was grey, not scarlet.

And it was not a vine… it was a living creature that resembled a giant worm — or rather, a puppet made from the creature's corpse, if Sunny's suspicion was correct.

The worm was dozens of meters in length, with a strangely flat body that was smeared in ash. At the end of it, an appalling maw bristled with countless teeth, and just beneath them, circular suckers were like sores on the translucent skin of the beast.

Those suckers adhered to the surface of the ancient bone, and the ash worm rose above the edge of the chasm, its head swaying from side to side. As soon as the light of the radiant sky fell on it, hideous burns appeared on its skin, and wisps of smoke rose into the air.

'Damnation.'

One monstrous worm was not a problem, no matter how powerful it was. However, just a split second later, another one appeared, and another, and another…

The ash worms were rising from the darkness, climbing both sides of the chasm. Soon, their grey body covered its walls, forming living, slithering strings.

And countless figures emerged from the darkness, as well, climbing the strings of ash worms like ladders.

Sunny shuddered.

Throughout the siege of the Greater Crossing Stronghold, countless soldiers and enthralled abominations had perished. Some bodies were retrieved, but most plummeted into the dark depths, disappearing forever.

He thought that they had become food to the harrowing creatures that dwelled in the ash covering the bottom of the chasm. But as it turned out, the ash dwellers became victims of the dead, instead.

All that time, the Queen had been waging a secret war against the creatures of the ash. She won that war, and now, the fallen of the Greater Crossing Siege — all those countless victims whose lives had been snuffed out by the cruelty of war — were coming back to avenge themselves upon the living.

A blood-crusted human hand crested the edge of the chasm, and a moment later, a disfigured corpse climbed from the darkness, smeared in ash.

Empty eyes gazed upon the assembling army, and then glinted with murderous intent.

The puppet took its first step toward the warriors of the Sword Domain.

And countless others soon followed.

'Damn, damn, damn…'

Chapter-2200: Army of the Dead

As the war dragged on, a great number of people had been killed in the fierce clashes between the two invading armies — and perhaps an even greater number of Nightmare Creatures had perished to human blades. Many, if not most of them, became puppets of the Queen of Worms.

The Sword Army had destroyed countless pilgrims, and yet, their number only continued to grow. That was why time was an ally of the Song Domain — the longer the war continued, the more advantage it gained.

That advantage had already played a large role in the siege of the Greater Crossing Stronghold. Pilgrims made for convenient meat shields for the defenders of the fortress, sacrificing their bodies to lessen the losses suffered by the Song Army, while at the same time increasing the losses suffered by the forces of the Sword Domain.

And yet, the pilgrims had never been a decisive factor in the battles between the two human armies.

…Today, that could very well change.

Ki Song had amassed a secret army of the dead at the bottom of the abyssal chasm, and now, that army crawled from the darkness. A tide of ashen corpses poured from the depths, climbing the puppeteered corpses of the monstrous worms like siege towers.

Sunny gritted his teeth as the wind carried the shouts of the officers to his ears from the ground. They were desperately trying to assemble the army into a solid battle formation in time, but it was hopeless.

The avalanche of the ashen dead had caught them by surprise.

Before the disorganized soldiers could form into a proper line, the

dead tide was upon them. Ashen corpses tore into the vulnerable mass of humans like hungry wolves, ripping into their armor and their flesh with bare hands — as well as with fangs, claws, and mandibles, since there were plenty of dead Nightmare Creatures among them.

This time, there was something different about the pilgrims. It seemed… it seemed that the Queen was not holding herself back anymore.

Before, her puppets were a little sluggish and somewhat easy to deal with. But now, they moved with great precision and skill, no less deadly than seasoned Awakened warriors were… no, in fact, it was as if each of them possessed skill and combat awareness that were far greater than those of ordinary soldiers.

With his shadow sense, which spread far and wide to encompass the entire field, Sunny could feel the full extent of their chilling lethality. Their skill was so eerily deadly and profound, in fact, that he was struggling to understand its essence… as if each and every one of the countless pilgrims was a superior fighter than him, or his equal at least.

The thought made Sunny shiver.

'Is she controlling each of them… all of them… by hand now?'

If Ki Song was capable of personally controlling all of her countless puppets at the same time, then her power was even greater than they had feared.

The pilgrims moved with cold and ruthless determination. The Awakened soldiers stood no chance against these dead, unfeeling killing machines… or they would not have, if not for the very nature of the Queen's puppets. Pilgrims had no souls, and therefore lacked the ability to possess and summon Memories — so, they fought unarmed.

More than that, many of the bodies that had fallen into the chasm were severely damaged, which limited their strength and mobility. They seemed to be able to mend themselves, to a degree, but Ki Song

was either unwilling or unable to truly restore these broken bodies to a better state.

Human blood flowed upon the white surface of the ancient bone.

Sunny felt sick to his stomach.

Not only because people were dying far below, but also because he was the reason they were dying.

After all, if it wasn't for him, Nephis, and Cassie, this battle would not have happened.

The Song soldiers at the Lesser Crossing Stronghold would have been dying under the swords of Anvil's warriors in a day or two, instead.

The sum of deaths might not have changed as a result of Cassie's actions — and his silent support of her — but nevertheless, he felt like a traitor.

No, he was a traitor. To the people who were dying because of his betrayal far below, he was.

That was a burden Sunny would have to carry, and its weight, while not great, was still unpleasant.

The tide of the dead bit into the side of the unprepared army, causing heavy casualties. Worse still, those of the soldiers who perished rose from the ground a few moments later, empty-eyed, joining the ranks of the rampaging corpses.

For a minute or two, it seemed as if the initial shock of the pilgrim attack would snowball into a one-sided massacre — one that would only grow into a harrowing disaster before too long.

But the soldiers of the Sword Army were not weaklings, either.

As the initial shock receded, the soldiers dug down and met the Queen's puppets blow for blow. Overcoming their horror, they gritted their teeth and stood their ground. The officers organized their warriors into unit-scale formations, bringing order to the senseless slaughter. The units moved to support each other and merge into a

proper battle line.

The battle line could have still collapsed… but at that moment, the Saints entered the battlefield, pushing the tide of pilgrims back.

Nephis was there, as well, her flames spreading far and wide to wash away the wounds of the soldiers and save those who would have joined the army of the dead otherwise.

The Queen took the dead, making them rise from the ground with empty eyes… Changing Star, however, healed the living, helping them rise to their feet with their own strength.

The Chain Breaker reached the battlefield, and the Fire Keepers jumped down from its deck, joining the fight.

It seemed as if the Sword Army would be able to repel the unexpected attack, after all…

But, of course, that was merely an illusion.

Because the pilgrims were not the tip of the spear. They were a distraction.

Their purpose was to buy enough time for the real peril to arrive…

Chapter-2201: Flowing Blood

The Song Army faced the same hardship their enemy had faced during countless assaults on the great fortress in the past.

There were no ramparts on the eastern side of the chasm, but the chasm itself remained — crossing it under the barrage of enemy arrows and launching an attack from the shaky bridges was a task that would thrust any strategist into despair, and Seishan was no different from Nephis in that regard.

That was the purpose the tide of the ashen dead had served. While the Sword Army was distracted by repelling their ghastly attack, the garrison of the Greater Crossing Stronghold had time to brave the chasm.

The besieging army had used war engines to shoot mighty steel cables over the abyssal gorge, which then served as supports to build hanging bridges. As time went on, the sappers improved and iterated upon both the war engines and the structure of the bridges, making them easier to raise and harder to bring down.

The assaults started when the cables shot over the chasm, and ended when all bridges were destroyed.

The Song Army, however, did not possess the war engines, and neither did they have a storied contingent of seasoned, crafty sappers to build them. They cut themselves from the other side of the chasm the moment they destroyed the original bridge that had connected Collarbone Plain to the Breastbone Reach in the past.

That did not stop them today, though.

While the pilgrims and the Sword Army clashed, the ash worms continued to crawl up the slopes of the chasm. Now that their bodies had already served their purpose and delivered the hidden army of

puppets to the surface, they were free to move.

The abominable creatures tangled with each other, fusing body to body with the help of their circular suckers. The seething mass of ashen flesh reached across the dark abyss, while more worms crawled across its surface to extend it further.

There was one slithering tendril of ash worms rising from the eastern slope of the chasm and stretching west, and another rising from the western slope of the chasm, right below the gates of the great fortress, and stretching east.

The two met above the darkness of the chasm, and merged together.

Just then, the towering gates of the Greater Crossing Stronghold opened.

Human soldiers poured from inside, followed by the thralls of Beastmaster. The Nightmare Creatures were used as beasts of burden, hauling fragments of the dismantled wall behind them. The soldiers were military engineers — while the Song Army did not have as many sappers, it did have some, even if they were not as skilled and ingenious as their counterparts in the enemy camp.

The sappers laid the lumber that had once comprised the proud walls of the impregnable fortress atop the mass of ash worm puppets, swiftly turning it into the deck of a great bridge.

Then, columns of soldiers stepped onto the bloody wood, marching across the bridge like a river.

By the time the Sword Army managed to push the pilgrims back, the garrison of the great fortress had already stepped on the surface of the Breastbone Reach, securing a foothold and spreading to form a wedge-shaped attack formation.

The Seventh Royal Legion was at the tip of the wedge, and Saint Seishan, the Lost Princess of Song, personally stood in front of her warriors, clad in enchanted armor of blood-red silk and crimson scales.

Her grey skin seemed to shine in the radiant light of the veiled sky.

Throwing a look at the dark mass of the pilgrims and the enemy army hidden behind it, she raised a hand and made a fist.

Then, without wasting any time, Seishan waved her soldiers forward.

Her voice rolled across the bone plain, followed by the reverberating howl of the war horns.

"Warriors of Song! Attack! For the Queen!"

The Song Army rushed forward.

The pilgrims formed the first wave, the thralls of Beastmaster formed the second. Human warriors were the third.

Standing far above the battlefield, Sunny gritted his teeth.

If he considered the situation coldly, there was nothing to worry about. Even if the Sword Army lost this battle, it would not hurt the plan at all. If anything, it would empower the Queen's position, making her inevitable clash against the King more equal.

Which meant that the two of them would exhaust each other more before one of them reached their limit, and would therefore become easier prey.

However, having spent months as a member of the Sword Army, Sunny could not help but feel distressed when the battle turned against his fellow soldiers.

Clenching his fists, he muttered a curse and turned his back to the battlefield.

His expression became cold.

"It won't be long, now. They will pay for all their crimes soon."

***

...Before too long, the Sword Army was buckling.

On the ground, the battle formation of the Sword Domain soldiers

was being ravaged by the pilgrims, the thralls, and the warriors of Song. There were vast pockets of emptiness around calamitous clashes between the Transcendent champions — the Sword Saints were at a numerical disadvantage, and were therefore slowly being overwhelmed.

In the sky, the Chain Breaker and the few remaining aerial Echoes were locked in a fierce dogfight against the winged Nightmare Creatures, the Ivory Island hanging above them like a celestial fortress.

The battle had been ferocious and chaotic, claiming many lives in a flash. The Sword Army had never managed to fully recover from the initial tactical disadvantage, and despite its fierce resistance, its formation was on the verge of being broken and split apart.

Once that happened, the battle was going to turn into a slaughter.

It was all just too sudden, and had happened too fast. Before the dazed soldiers could even come to terms with reality, they were already on the precipice of defeat.

Screams and clangor of steel filled the air, and the once-pristine surface of the ancient bone was greedily drinking human blood. The eerie thing about the battle was that despite rivers of blood being spilled, there were hardly any bodies on the ground…

That was because no one stayed lying on the ground for too long in the carnage. Those who were lucky were healed by soothing white flames, while those who were not turned into empty-eyed puppets.

…However, the outcome of the battle was not decided yet.

Because Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan had not entered the melee yet.

When she finally did, however…

Two figures barred her path.

One was a monstrous creature wearing an armor of blood-red silk and crimson scales — she was Seishan, who had assumed her battle

form.

The other was an exquisitely beautiful young woman with a delicate build and pale blonde hair. Her eyes were hidden behind a blue blindfold, and there was an empty scabbard attached to her belt.

It was Cassie.

She stood motionless in the middle of the battlefield, not showing any emotion. Her expression was tranquil… almost serene, as if the ghastly nightmare of the harrowing battlefield had no effect on her at all.

Nephis lowered her sword, looking at Cassie with a hint of doubt in her cold, grey eyes.

"...Cas?"

She was only pretending to be surprised, of course, having already guessed what Cassie wanted to do… and what the Song clan was going to do, as well.

But each of them had their role to play.

The monstrous visage of Seishan suddenly loomed over the blind seer. However, even when the ghastly creature's claws rose to rest against her throat, Cassie did not move.

"Nephis…"

Seishan's usually pleasant, husky voice sounded hoarse and distorted, coming out of her terrifying maw.

"You'd better stand down. There will be many battles… but you only have one friend."

Nephis looked at the princess of Song coldly as white flames ignited in her eyes.

"...You seem confident in yourself, Seishan. Are you sure that you can hurt her before I turn you to ash?"

Seishan seemed to hesitate for a moment.

Then, her lips twisted into a grin, revealing several rows of sharp triangular fangs.

"I do believe that I can… but let us not find out."

With that, she lowered her hand, leaving several shallow cuts on Cassie's slender neck.

Then, Seishan said evenly:

"Cassia."

At some point, a dagger appeared in the delicate woman's hand. At the sound of Seishan's voice, Cassie silently raised the dagger and pressed it against her own neck.

Her expression remained eerily calm.

Neph's expression, however, changed slightly.

"What did you…"

Before she could finish the sentence, Cassie pressed the blade deeper, and a thin stream of blood escaped from beneath it.

"Stop!"

Nephis took a step forward, then froze, gritting her teeth.

Her voice sounded even, but there was a note of wariness in it:

"Stop..."

Seishan studied her somberly for a little while.

"I think it is you who should stop. Look around… this battle is already lost, anyway. You will gain nothing if you continue to fight. On the contrary, you will lose something precious."

Answering to her Aspect, the blood flowed faster from the cut on Cassie's neck.

Nephis regarded Seishan silently for a while, her blazing eyes betraying a feeling of dark contempt.

Second passed after second, with more blood spilling on the ancient bone.

Eventually, she gritted her teeth.

...And shouted:

"Retreat!"

Chapter-2202: One Way or Another

The bloody battle had come to an end.

…It was a strange ordeal.

No one had expected the Queen to attack, but she had. From that point forward, the Song Army had no way back — having abandoned their stronghold and given up on retreating to the heavily fortified main camp, the warriors of Song were as good as committed to one final, decisive battle.

So, what they needed to do before that was weaken the enemy as much as they could. Simply routing the besieging army was not enough, since the surviving soldiers of the Sword Domain would be able to regroup with the forces led by the King and return to the battlefield days later.

No, what Ki Song needed was a slaughter. A thorough culling that would deeply wound the entire Sword Army, cutting its overall strength by almost a half… while simultaneously making the ranks of her dead legion swell. That would have been the soundest strategic solution, at least.

And yet, there was no slaughter. The defeated forces of the Sword Domain were allowed to retreat — having suffered severe casualties, but mostly intact.

The reason why the Queen had spared them was simple…

It was Nephis, Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan.

There was no Saint among the Transcendent champions of the Song Army who could defeat her in battle. Even if they joined forces, the

outcome was unclear — especially considering that there were other Sword Saints supporting her.

The only way to defeat Changing Star was for the Queen to kill her personally.

Which she very well could do now that the final confrontation was drawing near. However, if Ki Song did enter the battlefield personally to kill Nephis and destroy the greater contingent of the Sword Army, then Anvil of Valor would without a doubt do the same, wiping out Song forces at the Lesser Crossing personally.

Countless Awakened soldiers would die, and plenty of Saints would die, as well. The King would lose his adopted daughter, while the Queen would lose three of hers. At the end, both sides would come out of the conflict bloodied and weakened, having gained no decisive advantage…

Granted, Ki Song stood to gain much more from the ghastly exchange than Anvil. That was because she would not just be killing Changing Star, but also conquering her Citadel, the Ivory Island — a great boon that could vastly improve her position in Godgrave. So, the cold logic of war still dictated that blood had to be spilled.

But perhaps because the Queen cared about her daughters more than the King did, she stayed her hand.

The gruesome battle had come to an abrupt end without a Sovereign unleashing their power, and the battered forces of the Sword Army were allowed to retreat. The Ivory Island drifted away, overseeing the retreating soldiers — most of them had survived, but too many had not.

The Song Army watched in grim silence.

Somewhere far away, in the Hollows, the news of the sudden attack had already reached the ears of the King of Swords.

After that, the very last act of the profane war of Godgrave began to play out.

The initiative was on the side of the Song Army, so they had the right

to choose the final battlefield. Surprisingly enough, Ki Song did not lead her warriors south, but instead marched further east across the Breastbone Reach, deeper into the territory controlled by Anvil.

Eventually, her forces reached the northern edge of the dead god's sternum — a point almost directly opposite the great precipice far south, where the Nameless Temple stood.

Out there, with an abyssal drop to the distant mountain chain of the titanic skeleton's spine behind them, the warriors of Song made camp and started preparing for battle.

They could not have chosen a more eerie battlefield.

Here, the outskirts of the Hollow Mountains were extremely close, and the dark mountains themselves rose from the ground like a jagged black wall in the distance. Cold winds were blowing from the misty slopes, colliding with the heated air of Godgrave and giving birth to furious tornadoes from time to time.

Most disturbingly of all, the colossal skull of the dead god loomed above the northern edge of the Breastbone Reach, its inconceivable scale dwarfing the entire world despite the distance. The neck and the head of the titanic skeleton rested on the slopes of the Hollow Mountains, as if on a pillow, so it almost seemed as if the skull was staring directly at the battlefield from high above.

The unfathomably large, gaping holes of its eyes were full of impenetrable darkness, and its jaw was opened slightly, as if struggling to let out a harrowing groan.

…Or twist into a terrifying grin.

The dead god watched the mortals prepare to fight their last battle in silence, cold mists flowing across the white bone.

Since Ki Song had extended Anvil an invitation, he had no choice but to accept.

Going after the main camp of the Song Army and the Collarbone Citadel was also an option, but that would leave his own army camp vulnerable — so, he pulled the forces that had been supposed to

attack the Lesser Crossing from the rear out of the Hollows, gathered the second siege contingent of the Sword Army, and marched north.

The defenders of the Lesser Crossing were left in a perplexing situation.

The force that had been laying siege to their stronghold retreated, leaving them with nothing to do. At the same time, they could neither march across the Breastbone Reach, since the King's army was in the way, nor return to the Collarbone Plain and march east, since there was not enough time — therefore, they could not rejoin the Queen before the final battle.

So, instead, the lesser contingent of the Song Army crossed from the First Rib to the Breastbone Reach and marched south, aiming to conquer the Nameless Temple… it remained to be seen if they would reach it before the two armies clashed, however.

The King seemed to believe that they would not.

At some point, the marching army under his command absorbed the retreating remains of the greater contingent and proceeded to the final battlefield.

Sunny and Nephis were busy with their own preparations for the last battle, of course.

Nephis led the retreating soldiers, while the Lord of Shadows had followed the King from Vanishing Lake north. They were reunited when the two forces met and merged, maintaining a polite distance between each other under the prying eye of the King.

Granted, the situation among those in command of the Sword Army was a bit awkward.

Saint Jest, the King's confidant, had secretly gotten into hot water for killing Song of the Fallen, Changing Star's right hand. Worse still, as it turned out, she was not really dead — instead, she was perfectly alive, and had been somehow captured by the Queen on top of that, which played a large role in the defeat of the siege forces at the Greater Crossing.

For most of the high-ranking members of the Sword Army, it was entirely unclear what exactly had transpired and how Saint Cassia ended up becoming a hostage of the Queen. Some whispered that she had betrayed the Sword Domain, but since her extreme loyalty to Changing Star was well-known, few believed these rumors.

Instead, most of the Sword Saints came to believe that it was the King himself who had conspired against Song of the Fallen. After all, everyone in the Sword Army had witnessed how he was suppressing his adopted daughter — to the point of sending a few of her Fire Keepers to their deaths.

Was it such a stretch to assume that the King would endeavor to remove her most powerful follower from the picture, as well? After all, the last time anyone saw Lady Cassia before the Greater Crossing battle, she had been leaving on a dangerous mission in the company of Saint Jest… and everyone who needed to know knew what kinds of tasks Jest performed for the King.

So, the mood among the champions of the Sword Army was somber and heavy.

Anvil did nothing to remove their doubts, treating the situation with his usual cold indifference.

And while all of that was happening…

One of Sunny's incarnations had traveled south, reaching the Nameless Temple at the same time as the retreating forces of the Sword Army met the contingent led by the King.

On the surface, he was acting under orders, aiming to defend the Citadel from a possible conquest party of Song champions. In reality, of course, Sunny had an entirely different goal.

Entering the dark hole of his Citadel, he looked around and let out a sigh.

'It's really happening. My, oh my…'

A dark smile twisted his lips under the mask.

Far north, under the terrifying gaze of the dead god…

The Sword Army reached the northern edge of the Breastbone Reach, spreading slowly to cut any possible path of retreat for the soldiers of Song.

The two armies camped in full view of each other, with only a vast plain of white bone separating them.

Soon enough, the white bone was going to be painted red.

The future of humanity was going to be decided on that bloody field…

One way or another.

Chapter-2203: Final Stage

Sunny was looking ahead from two entirely different perspectives.

He was Master Sunless, standing on the emerald grass of the Ivory Island. He was also the Lord of Shadows, standing on the surface of the ancient bone in the middle of the sprawling mass of the camped army.

The Hollow Mountains — a familiarly chilling sight — were rising like a colossal dark wall in the distance, with white mist shrouding the jagged black peaks. And there, between his somber incarnations and the misty slopes, a titanic skull loomed above the world, looking down at the insignificant struggles of the mortal warriors with an indifferent, eerie grin.

Each of its empty eye sockets was large enough to encompass a vast city, filled with nothing but impenetrable darkness.

Both of Sunny's incarnations shivered.

'It's strange, really.'

Considering the nature of Godgrave, he would have expected the skull to bloom with an ocean of scarlet growth, the abominable jungle spilling from its eyes like tears of blood. But even the jungle seemed wary of the dead god's skull, staying as far away from it as possible.

Considering what horrors dwelled in the ancient jungle, Sunny shuddered to imagine what kind of being could have scared the scarlet infestation away. Even the Sovereigns seemed unwilling to solve that particular mystery, which was why both of them had stayed clear of the skull.

Perhaps he would find out one day, when he was much stronger than

even the Supremes… he would have to live through the final battle of the war first, of course.

His gaze drifted down from the dreadful visage of the titanic skull, returning to the ground.

The Song Army encampment was like a black line on the horizon — a considerable distance for mortal men, but barely a stone's throw away for a Transcendent like him. They were close enough for his shadow sense to encompass the enemy camp, at least, if he wanted to attract the Queen's attention.

There was nothing but the abyssal drop behind them, and the Sword Army had already cut off all paths of retreat. Making camp at the edge of the Breastbone Reach, under the watchful gaze of the dead god, was as much of a strategic decision as it was a statement.

Having their backs to the abyss ensured that the Sword Army would not be able to use its numerical superiority to completely encircle the warriors of Song. And at the same time, it conveyed a message — the Queen had no intentions of retreating.

It was victory or death for her, as it was for her men.

The vast stretch of white bone separated the two camps. The armies were preparing for battle, but the usual clamor was subdued. An oppressive quietness enveloped both camps. The wary soldiers were readying themselves in grim silence, their pale faces contrasting sharply against the deep darkness nestling in their eyes.

They had the look of people who had long lost grasp of reason, and were numbly going through the motions simply because stopping meant death.

The promise of one final, decisive battle filled them with dread and a strange kind of excitement in equal measure. Dread because many of them would die… most of them, perhaps. Excitement because the war, which had seemed endless, was finally coming to an end.

That said, Sunny wasn't quite sure about what this final battle was supposed to achieve.

The logic of a mundane war was quite simple — two armies faced each other, and the one that broke first lost. However, this war… the Domain War, Realm War, or simply the Great War, as people tended to call it lately… was different.

Because all the struggles and sacrifices that the soldiers had made were simply a prologue to the true confrontation — to the fight between the two Supremes. They had spent decades quietly preparing to fight each other, developing their forces and moving game pieces into advantageous positions.

Then, their Domains clashed in a bloody struggle to carve as much power as possible and break the tenuous balance between them by subjugating Godgrave.

Anvil had come out victorious from that clash, nearly pushing the forces of Ki Song off the titanic skeleton... but the Queen had ultimately won. She had destroyed the House of Night, usurped its Citadels of the Storm Sea, and set Mordret loose in the Sword Domain, thus diminishing the power of the enemy while greatly increasing her own.

Now, time was on her side. The longer she delayed the final confrontation, the greater the chance that Valor would lose Bastion became. There was Revel and Gilead, too, who were supposed to be approaching the two remaining Citadels in Godgrave — which meant that Anvil would not give her time and attack as soon as possible.

But what would such an attack even achieve?

Slaughtering Awakened soldiers would diminish the power of a Domain somewhat, but not as much as conquering Citadels or slaying Saints would. And neither of the Sovereigns would let their Saints fall without reason.

There were no Citadels on the northern edge of the Breastbone Reach. There was no territory to conquer here, either.

So, as far as Sunny could understand…

The two armies were preparing for battle for no reason whatsoever. If

the Sovereigns were sane — and they were, in their own perverse way — they would not send their soldiers to slaughter each other on this pristine white field.

Instead, they would finally step onto the battlefield themselves.

Ki Song had at least some justification to prolong the conflict, but Anvil did not. So even if the Queen tried to force a clash between the armies, he had no reason to allow her to stall.

The soldiers were merely a tool to tie the adversary down — a potential danger that could not be ignored, and would therefore force the enemy's hand. They were merely here to witness one Sovereign fall, while the other ascended to the throne of war.

Sunny took a deep breath.

'That is, if I understand everything.'

But he could very well be missing something.

In any case, the stage was set.

The main characters of the play were about to enter the spotlight.

History was going to decide who was the hero, and who was the villain.

Not that it mattered, in the grand scheme of things.

…He had done everything he could, as well.

Now, it was time to see if his efforts were enough.

There was no day and night in Godgrave, and therefore no dawn.

So, the moment the two armies stirred and started to move was no different from any other.

Master Sunless took a deep breath on the Ivory Island.

Far below, the Lord of Shadows cracked his neck.

'It's really ending.'

Smiling behind the mask, he glanced at the looming skull one last time.

'Watch well, whatever you are. I don't know how this play will end... but it will definitely be entertaining.'

Chapter-2204: Unnamed

Across the wide expanse of pristine white bone, Rain was watching numbly as the soldiers around her were slowly leaving the camp to assemble into a battle formation.

The Seventh Royal Legion, despite having suffered severe casualties, was at the very center of the Song Army once again. They were going to face the Knights of Valor once again, and endure the fiercest of the fighting once again. If there was something different, though, it was that Princess Seishan was leading them personally this time.

Her grace and exquisite beauty were enough to take one's breath away… today, however, it paled in front of a delicate woman standing by her side. It was Saint Cassia, Song of the Fallen — the Transcendent hostage of the Queen.

One of them was like the moon, while the other was like the sun. The eyes of the soldiers were drawn to the two Saints against their will, and Rain could see a hint of a strange, dreamlike emotion ignite in the numb gazes of the terrified soldiers.

It was a bit like the way Ray looked at Fleur, and Fleur looked at Ray.

Come to think of it… it was also like the way her brother looked at soul shards.

Which was a bit strange, considering that she had not seen him absorb a soul shard even once.

'To each their own, I guess.'

Rain did not know how Cassie ended up being captured by Clan Song, and was in no position to worry about the beautiful Saint.

Inhaling slowly, she looked at her shadow.

Then, she whispered quietly:

"Is there… really going to be a battle?"

There had been many battles in this war, but none as frightening as this one. This one… would be the last, after all. The Song Army had nowhere to retreat, either.

Her shadow answered in a whisper.

"I don't know."

It remained silent for a few moments, and then added somberly:

"Whatever happens, though, do your best to survive. I might be… indisposed, later."

Rain exhaled.

There was a strange emotion in her heart. Something she had never felt before, and could not quite name… the word was at the tip of her tongue, demanding to be spoken, but it was not coming to her.

It felt too powerful to be a simple feeling, and oddly elusive.

She checked her bow, and then said awkwardly:

"...You too. Do your best to survive, I mean."

Her shadow chuckled.

"That's the plan."

He did not get the opportunity to say anything else, however, because Tamar approached her at that moment.

The Legacy girl looked like she always did… well, actually, not quite.

Rain had not noticed it before, but Tamar had changed a lot from the young girl she met on the Moonriver Plain. Before, her stern demeanor did not quite fit her youthful appearance, as if Tamar was

only playing the adult without quite having the maturity to be one.

She was still just as young, but there was a firm coldness and a dark confidence to her eyes that had not been there before — a kind of harshness that did not fit the eyes of someone so young... not in any kind of world worth living in, at least.

Rain suspected that she had the same haunted look in her own eyes. All of them, soldiers of the Song Army, had it now… the soldiers of the Sword Army were probably no different.

War had a way of quickly turning youths into adults, and adults into a broken mess.

She sighed.

Tamar looked at Rain silently for a few moments.

"Are you ready?"

Rain forced out a smile.

"Not at all."

Her friend nodded curtly, then said in the same neutral tone:

"Well… tough."

Hearing that, Rain couldn't help but laugh.

A tentative smile found its way on Tamar's lips, as well.

"Gods… I was hired to build roads, you know? How did I end up in this mess?"

Tamar shrugged.

"You don't know?"

She hesitated for a moment, then sighed.

"Listen, Rani… I wasn't going to mention anything, but since you're asking, I'll just say it. It's because you're not very bright. No, really —

every decision you make is unwise. Actually, unwise is not quite enough to describe it. Ill-advised... monumentally stupid? Yeah, that's better. It is a bit shocking, honestly, the consistency with which you manage to make the worst possible choice in each and every damn situation…"

Rain grinned. Considering how much the usually taciturn Tamar was talking, she seemed nervous, too.

Her logic was quite sound, though.

Rain sighed and shook her head, then asked in a slightly amused tone:

"You do know that Rani is not my real name, right?"

It was just something that entered her mind out of the blue. It was a bit funny, that none of her friends even knew what her name was... they could even die without ever finding out.

That would be a bit sad.

Tamar stopped talking and blinked, staring at her in confusion. A few moments later, she asked slowly:

"...It isn't?"

Rain shook her head.

"Nope."

Her friend seemed genuinely startled. She remained silent for a while, then raised an eyebrow.

"What is your real name, then?"

Rain coughed, suddenly feeling embarrassed.

"That, uh… well, you know. It's Rain, actually."

Tamar stared at her for a while, then sighed and palmed her face.

"So you just moved two letters around? Ah… what can I even say?

Case in point."

Rain gave her a look of indignation.

"Hey! It's… it's not easy to come up with a fake name on the spot, you know! You try it!"

The young Legacy shook her head.

"I don't see why I ever would."

They looked at each other, smiling.

...Their smiles were pale and fragile, though.

All around them, the Song Army was slowly moving, assembling into a battle formation.

Across the wide divide of the pristine white plain, the Sword Army was doing the same.

However, before two armies met under the radiant sky of Godgrave…

Three different battles were coming to an end somewhere else — far away, but promising to change the outcome of the war despite the distance.

Chapter-2205: Run to Failure

A shattered moon shone upon a shattered castle. The castle had always been a ruin, but now it was reduced to rubble. The rubble used to be surrounded by a deep lake, but now, the lake was gone.

Its bottom had been revealed, in all its mystery and horror…

Indifferent to what lay at the bottom of the lake, Morgan of Valor hunched over an alloy pan and looked into the fire numbly.

There was a gentle gust of wind, and Nightingale landed nearby, greeting her and the other Saints. Then, a stronger gale crashed into the remains of a crumbling wall that protected the fire, and a small pebble fell from it down toward the pan.

Morgan did not move, allowing the pebble to fall into the pan.

A few moments later, she sighed heavily.

'...I'm sick of it.'

How many times had it been, already?

The day repeated itself endlessly. Each time, she gathered her Saints and faced her brother in battle. Each time, they lost miserably and died. Over and over again, she suffered the pain of her body being torn apart and broken, activating the enchantment that reset time at the last moment.

Rinse and repeat.

It had been somewhat exciting at first. Morgan did not enjoy losing, but she loved battle. So, this closed loop of endless warfare was like a playground for her — a lethal and vicious playground, but a fascinating one nonetheless.

Her brother, too, was a perfect enemy. He was strong, cunning, ruthless, and hateful… a worthy adversary for her own insidious mind, at last. Even better, he somehow retained the memories of all their previous battles, so the strategies he employed against her were both varied and increasingly diabolical.

But the novelty had quickly grown old.

Nobody was fond of hitting their head against a wall, after all. And Mordret was indeed a wall — an unbreakable barrier that she could not overcome, no matter how earnestly she tried. The power disparity was too vast. The resource distribution was too uneven…

Even though the champions under her command had proven to be far more formidable than her already quite flattering evaluation of them — especially the three government Saints — the Transcendent vessels Mordret controlled were deadlier. There were the Nightmare Creatures he kept subjugating, as well.

And even though they were fighting on a battlefield of her choosing, the ruins of true Bastion failed to contain Mordret in the end.

She had hoped that the Others would stifle him… maybe even destroy him. But although her brother had been held back by the threat of these eerie beings for a while, he seemed to have learned how to escape them eventually.

During one of the more desperate battles, Morgan had even employed a perilous strategy to draw them forth — using her Transcendent form, she fashioned her body into a flat plane of polished steel that towered above the ruins like a replica of the Great Mirror, reflecting the shattered moon and the broken castle back upon the world.

The swarm of the Others she had unleashed was a terror to behold, and resulted in some of the most harrowing deaths she witnessed even after months spent in the endless loop of hopeless battles. And yet, her brother had survived their onslaught for far longer than she had.

Looking back, that was the breaking point when this endless death loop had gone from tiresome to tedious.

And over many lost battles after that, Morgan had slowly grown numb. There was a difference between being defeated and surrendering to defeat… and while she was neither ready to nor capable of surrendering, it was getting hard to remember what she was fighting for, to begin with.

'Desire…'

Morgan often thought back to what her brother had told her during the Battle of the Black Skull. He had said that his desire to kill her was stronger than her desire to kill him, and that was why he was stronger.

Back then, she had dismissed his words as mockery… and an indication of the difference in their technique, perhaps. Her brother was perfectly willing to sacrifice his body to achieve victory — he had plenty of those to spare, after all. But Morgan was held back by the deeply human need to keep herself away from harm, which gave him a profound tactical advantage in a sword fight.

But now, she was starting to suspect that there was a deeper meaning to what her brother had said. Resolve, determination, conviction, will… those weren't simply empty words, not to powerful beings like them. All these passions were born of desire and fueled by it.

Desire… was the source of all virtues, as well as of all sins.

Mordret was driven by his ardent desire to avenge himself on his family, and while his wicked passion was as twisted as he was himself… what did Morgan have to offer in turn?

The desire to win? To prove herself worthy? To earn the approval of their father… or, if not, then to at least save herself the biting shame of disappointing him?

All those were too abstract, too empty. They had not seemed like that before, but they did now. More than that, these wishes had been forced upon her by others instead of coming from within her own soul. These small and meddlesome desires were only worthy of a princess who had been raised to be a tool.

They were not fit to be called a passion.

Morgan was not really passionate about anything, except maybe the pure art of war and combat itself. But that was not enough.

Her heart was not really in the battle… at least not to the degree this battle demanded. And, therefore, she could not win.

Luckily, she did not need to win. She just needed to hold out… out there in Godgrave, the final battle was swiftly approaching. A few more loops, and she would have accomplished her goal without even managing to defeat her brother.

How ironic was that?

Even knowing that the end was near, though, Morgan could not get herself to feel any excitement.

She was tired, and all of it just all seemed senseless.

'...Damn. The stew is ruined.'

Wincing, Morgan extended a hand and fished the pebble out of the pan. Dropping it to the ground, she looked at the stew without much appetite.

"Dinner is ready."

Her voice was subdued.

Nightingale gave her a strange look. She had developed a bit of tolerance to his looks by now, but still… the man was obnoxiously handsome even when he felt unsure. It used to make her want to tease him more.

He was probably considering if she had been replaced by one of the Others now, full of trepidation.

Well… maybe not.

The government Saints had changed in the last few loops.

It was barely noticeable, but Morgan had spent too many repeating days in their company to miss the subtle difference.

Maybe they were the ones replaced by the Others…

She smiled slightly.

No, of course not. There was a much simpler answer to their changed attitudes.

Even without her telling them, they somehow knew about the loop.

Chapter-2206: Her Pride

Morgan was almost certain that Soul Reaper, Raised by Wolves, and Nightingale had become aware of the loop. They did not seem quite capable of retaining their memories, at least not yet, but something — or someone — was informing them of what was going on at the start of each new day.

The signs were subtle, but indisputable. Their reactions had changed subtly, and the words they spoke did not always match what they had usually said before. There was also that one time when Raised by Wolves had disappeared somewhere for almost an hour, then returned with a deep sense of discomfort hiding in the depths of her hazel eyes.

Morgan noted all these changes, but stayed silent about them.

It was not that difficult for someone locked in this loop to become aware of it. After all, it was merely a bubble of repeating time — vast enough to encompass the ruins of True Bastion and the surrounding lands, but relatively small in the grand scheme of things. Time continued to flow outside of the bubble, and the world continued to spin.

…If the Dream Realm even spun around an orbit, of course.

Morgan was familiar with events that had taken place inside the Tomb of Ariel — not the least of all because of the strangely detailed exploration report published by an anonymous author, whom Clan Valor had failed to find despite great efforts. The hourglass enchantment functioned similarly to the Great River created by the Demon of Dread, but on a much smaller scale.

In any case, while communicating with the outside world was difficult, it was not impossible. Morgan herself was receiving news of how the war proceeded in Godgrave from time to time… her brother

probably had a vessel or two hidden somewhere outside the bubble, without a doubt. That was most likely how he was able to retain the memories of their previous battles, even.

So, the government Saints could have very well received a communication from the outside world themselves — either a repeating one that informed them of the situation every day, or simply something that stayed with them as they returned to the past.

In fact, it was not even necessary for the information to come from the outside. Mordret himself could have contacted them, striking some kind of deal.

Morgan smiled faintly.

Was that it? Was she going to be betrayed? Had he already infected her subordinates — not by consuming their souls, but simply by convincing them with sweet words?

Betrayal was always a possibility. Every person had a key… some could be bought, some could be coerced. Some could be deceived, while some only needed to be given an opportunity to stab others in the back. Morgan had been on both sides of this equation enough times to know that trusting anyone fully was a foolish sentiment.

That said, she could not quite imagine Soul Reaper or Raised by Wolves striking a deal with Mordret after fighting side by side with the surviving Saints of the House of Night for so long. Least of all Nightingale, the inflexible bore…

So, their newfound awareness had most likely come from her dear sister, Changing Star. They had been members of her cohort once, after all, and although life led them to different paths, a connection like that was not easily broken by political affiliation.

So… what was Nephis scheming?

Suddenly, betrayal seemed even more inevitable.

Morgan chuckled and looked at Nightingale with an amused smile.

"No, I am not one of the Others. Come eat, everyone. The food is

getting cold."

Betrayal or not… she did not really care. So, Morgan pretended to be oblivious to their tense gazes and took the pan off the fire, ready to scoop the stew into the bowls.

They ate their food, like they always did. And then, they prepared for battle, like they always did.

And then, the moonlit ruins became a hellscape where monsters and demigods tore each other apart in a mad feast of destruction and blood, like they always did.

The gargantuan forms of Typhaon and Knossos moved across the shallow lake. Streams of starlight rained from the night sky, devastating the land. The titanic form of a steel goddess plummeted from the slopes of the mountain and landed in the drowned city below, making the world quake. A cold mist was spreading from within the ruins, and the haunting song of a night dragon permeated the dark sky.

Raising her sword, Morgan struggled with an overwhelming sense of déjà vu.

Why was she persisting? Surely, this senseless, never-ending slaughter was too much for a sane person to endure.

Her desire to win was nothing more than a malignant sense of obligation. Her desire to prove herself to others had turned to ash a long time ago, after she learned that those who would deem her unworthy were themselves not worthy of casting judgment on her.

Her desire to earn the approval of her father… to not become a disappointment in his cold, uncaring eyes… had lost all meaning as well, at some point.

Why was that?

As Mordret's vessels were destroyed one after another, and her Saints fell one after another, their blood painting the ruins red, Morgan took a deep breath.

Was it because she had become disappointed in him, as well?

Probably, yes. Not that he would care.

So why was she fighting?

A dark grin twisted Morgan's lips.

Well… was it not simply because she liked it?

Her desire to win might not have been as powerful as her brother's overwhelming, hate-fueled passion… but she had her pride, as well.

She hated to lose.

And that was reason enough for her to persist and fight for these ruins until the sky itself broke apart, and the pieces of the shattered moon fell down like a rain of fire.

Simply because she was too stubborn to give up, and knew how to appreciate a good battle.

A good war.

'Yeah… I like it. It's nice.'

Morgan was going to stop her brother — not for anyone else, but solely for herself.

Pale moonlight reflected from the blade of her sword as Morgan jumped from the ruined wall to face Mordret…

Like she always did.

Chapter-2207: Limit of Loyalty

Their battle was just as furious as always, but it felt a little different.

Because Morgan was tired, and because she was enjoying herself a little bit more.

She was strong, she was fearsome. Her Aspect was brimming with dire power — one that was sharp enough to cut down anything and anyone who stood in her way.

Or so she had thought before.

Over the past months, though, Morgan's edge had become a little dull. Any sword would lose its sharpness if someone kept hammering it against a hard surface, after all… and her brother's vile presence was much too difficult to cut.

Still, Morgan met him once again, and fought him once again.

By now, they knew the depths of each other's lethality all too well. She was a tide of living metal that drowned and shredded everything it touched. He was an insidious fiend who used stolen bodies and overwhelming force to exhaust and strangle his enemies, leaving them no chance to survive.

The ruins shuddered and turned to dust as Morgan battled Mordret and his Transcendent vessels. The wave of liquid metal flowed through them like a tide, enveloping the few remaining structures and toppling them one after another. The lumbering figures of Mordret's stolen bodies pursued, tearing at it with their fangs, their claws, and the power of their Aspects.

Some of them drowned in her flowing form and were eviscerated, while others managed to deal damage and bring her agony before being cut down.

Morgan felt a strange divide within herself…

She was enjoying the furious abandonment of battle. But at the same time, she felt like she was simply going through the motions.

It was both exhilarating and tedious in equal measure.

She wanted to stop.

But she did not… could not.

She refused to.

As her reserves of essence dwindled and her voluminous steel body slowly shrank as more and more of the liquid metal was frozen, annihilated, or swallowed by rust and corrosion, the mocking words of her brother pursued her:

"Ah, dear sister… aren't you repeating yourself? You contorted your Transcendent form into this hideous sword apparition seven battles ago. Or was it five? Ah, but it had fewer hands back then, I guess… still, do you really think that a few additional blades will save you?"

"Oh, look… isn't it Saint Naeve? Seems like he is missing his head, poor fellow. Goodness gracious, didn't he have a daughter? I guess you'll have to break the news to her soon. If you manage to run away from me again, of course…"

"Have you heard? They are chanting the name of Changing Star all over the world. Dear father has always preferred her to you, and now, the whole world does too. They have already forgotten your name, Morgan. Was there a second princess in the Sword Domain? Who? That is what they are saying, or so I've heard…"

Morgan laughed.

As if she cared...

Dismissing her Transcendent form and rolling down from a pile of rubble, she spat a mouthful of blood and rose to her feet shakily, using her sword as support.

Then, she looked around with a pale smile.

"Oh, look… all your vessels are dead."

Her smile faltered, though, when more blood flowed out of her mouth.

Morgan bent in a painful coughing fit, then straightened and wiped her mouth tiredly.

"And also, do you ever shut up? Why do people even call you the Prince of Nothing? They really should call you the Prince of Running His Mouth, instead…"

As Mordret — his original body — jumped down from the ruins of a tall wall and landed softly a dozen or so meters away, she looked at him and grinned.

"Right. It's because you were discarded by our father like trash, then tossed aside by the Dreamspawn like trash. You know what they say… one man's trash is another man's treasure. Doesn't seem to apply to you, though… bastard."

Her brother's smile grew a little forced.

At least she wanted to believe that it did.

Mordret chuckled.

"I'll enjoy ripping out that dirty tongue of yours, sister… again."

Morgan struggled to raise her sword and smiled.

"Do try."

He descended upon her like a natural disaster. Technically, Morgan was stronger than her brother — her Aspect bestowed many boons upon her, after all, while his had little to do with direct confrontation. However, she was wounded and exhausted after dealing with the vessels… and he was a Titan, as well, while she was a mere Beast.

Their power was almost evenly matched.

Almost…

In the end, Morgan still lost.

Her sword clattered as it slid across the ground, and she staggered back, falling to her knees. Her severed hand landed a few meters away, fingers twitching as crimson blood seeped into the rubble.

'Ah…'

The pain was exquisite.

Mordret glanced at her twitching hand, then looked at her with a pleasant smile.

"Well, that surely brings back memories. Should I take your eye, as well? That would be fitting, I think. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth."

He seemed to be in a strangely good mood.

Her brother always acted as if life was infinitely amusing, but today, his satisfaction seemed genuine for the first time.

That filled Morgan with a sudden feeling of dread.

She suppressed a groan and stared at him firmly.

"...What are you so happy about, bastard?"

Mordret scratched his head.

"You keep calling me a bastard on purpose, don't you? How pitiful. At least I didn't kill our mother, you know?"

Then, laughing, he walked over to Morgan and loomed above her, looking down with a twisted smile.

"I'll let it go today, though. There's cause for celebration! After all… I have finally won."

Morgan's eyes narrowed, and she pushed some air into her crushed lungs before saying through gritted teeth:

"Have you lost what little remains of your mind? You've won nothing, abomination. I might have lost again, but we will just continue to repeat this battle over, and over, and over again… until you are defeated. I have plenty of patience, believe me. I am willing to fight you until the world ends, if need be."

Mordret stared at her for a while, then threw his head back and laughed.

"I have no doubt! My stubborn sister... ah, but you don't really need to defeat me, do you? You just need to keep losing until our father clashes with Ki Song in battle."

Morgan just stared at him silently. They both knew it, so why was he mentioning it today?

Mordret's smile slowly drained away, and he looked at her with a cold, dark expression.

"What you failed to account for, though, is that I don't need to win here either."

Her eyes widened slightly, and she winced, struggling to contain the pain.

Her brother chuckled.

"You've been defending Bastion so bravely, sister, so valiantly… but I don't really need to conquer it, do I? I just need to make sure that it is lost to our father. That it ceases to be a part of his Domain, and therefore robs him of its power."

Morgan swayed a little.

"What are you… I am still in control of Bastion. It is still mine. And you can't take it from me, no matter how hard you try."

Crouching in front of her, Mordret leaned forward and whispered, his insidious voice flowing into her ear like honey:

"Exactly. It is yours… not our father's. It used to be a part of the Sword Domain simply because you were loyal to the King. Where is your loyalty now, though, Morgan? How much of it is left?"

She shivered.

Mordret looked at her coldly and said with chilling indifference, all pretense of being a human lost from his voice:

"You might pretend otherwise, but we both know… none of it is left, now. I helped you get rid of it. In these godforsaken ruins, I drained you of every drop of faith you had left in our father, and now, you are lost to him. He has lost you, and therefore…"

Her brother stood up and looked down with a dark and triumphant expression.

"...He has lost Bastion, as well. My mission is complete."

Taking a step back, he looked up at the shattered moon and exploded with laughter.

"Ah… it would have been so nice, so lovely to wrench control of this damned castle from your hands, but this… this is even sweeter, I think!"

Morgan stared at him in stunned horror, numbly searching her soul for any lingering attachment to their father… to his kingdom… to his great Domain.

But just like her brother had said, she could not find anything.

'No… wait…'

Stopping his laughter, Mordret lowered his head and looked at her darkly.

His lips twisted into a faint smile.

"...Time to die, sister."

Morgan stared back at him.

She lingered for a moment, and then said weakly:

"Go to hell."

With that, she activated the hourglass enchantment.

The tide of time was turned back once more.

…But even so, nothing could change the outcome of their battle, this time.

Chapter-2208: Will of the People

The femur of the dead deity turned from a great inclined plain into a labyrinth of vast, deep canyons near its southern edge… the end of Godgrave.

That was because both legs of the titanic skeleton had been shattered by a harrowing blow once, thousands of years ago. Both of its femurs were heavily damaged near the knees, deep cracks marring the surface of the ancient bone. Some cracks led to the Hollows… some were even deeper, going all the way to the Sea of Ash far below.

The knee joints themselves were out of sight, buried in the ash. Since nobody knew how deep the Sea of Ash was, it was impossible to tell if the dead god's tibias and fibulas were hidden under the endless grey carpet, or if something had severed them completely in the distant past.

The Citadel Gilead had been ordered to conquer was situated at the very last bone plateau, standing on the shore of the Sea of Ash…

The journey to the end of Godgrave had been harrowing. The battle for the Citadel, located so close to the endless expanse of ash, promised to be more harrowing still.

"Are you sure that we can even take it?"

The voice sounded tired.

Gilead kept his gaze aimed across the last canyon, then turned slowly to look at his last companion.

The two of them were all that remained of the expedition.

His lustrous armor had long been destroyed, and his skin had turned the color of bronze under the merciless radiance of the overcast. Even his tunic had been bleached by the light, losing all color.

The woman's parasol was in the same sorry state. The beautiful patterns that used to cover its surface were now faint and feeble, barely noticeable in the bright light.

It was a miracle that the flimsy thing had survived at all.

Looking at the woman, Gilead suddenly found the situation comical.

So many brave warriors had died… skilled Awakened, fearsome Masters. Even a powerful Saint. And yet, this mundane luxury item the woman had brought with herself on a whim was in one piece.

He sighed deeply.

Gilead's blue eyes were vivid and feverish, but the woman's green eyes were dim and calm.

After endless days of horror and suffering, they had finally reached their destination. Now, there were only these few last obstacles left for them to overcome… the last canyon, the last plateau, and the Citadel itself.

He remembered that she had asked him a question and nodded belatedly.

"We must take it, and therefore, we will."

The lower part of the woman's face was hidden behind a scarf, but he could tell by her eyes that she smiled.

She had not smiled in a while, so that was probably a good sign.

"It's just the two of us now. Two Saints against whatever profane horror guards that Citadel… I'd say the odds are not in our favor."

Gilead pursed his lips, then shook his head grimly.

"We've made it so far. So, we'll take it."

The woman studied him for a while, then leaned back and laughed.

Then, she folded her parasol and looked at him coldly.

Confused, Gilead turned to the canyon.

"Let's rest here. I will carry you to the other side once we have recovered our essence…"

"No."

He paused, unsure if he had heard her right.

Looking back, he frowned.

"...No?"

The woman was smiling.

"Yes… no."

She leaned on her parasol and spoke, her voice remaining calm.

"I was going to tell you a while back... on the day we lost half of the remaining soldiers, and you refused to turn back. But then, I decided to wait a bit. To crush your spirit better."

Gilead blinked, staring at her in confusion.

"What do you mean? The Citadel…"

The woman chuckled.

"I refuse."

Noticing his incomprehension, she shook her head.

"Everyone is dead, but I am alive. I am alive because you've kept me alive, and you've kept me alive because you need a homeless Saint to claim the Citadel. But I won't. I refuse. Honestly, I'd rather dive into the Sea of Ash head-first. Oh... and you go to hell, Summer Knight. There is a special place there prepared for people like you, I'm sure."

She laughed again, sounding more than a little unhinged to his ears.

Had she been harboring these thoughts quietly all this time?

Her green eyes came alive again, growing as bright as they had been once… before they left on this cursed expedition.

"There, I spoke my piece. Now, I'm leaving."

Gilead frowned, stumped.

He was too tired, too hurt, and too spent to comprehend the strange situation. His thoughts were moving slowly.

What was she saying?

No, he understood what she was saying. But words weren't magical spells that bent reality to one's wishes. What did she expect would happen because of her outburst?

"We have our orders."

The woman raised an eyebrow, her green eyes full of mirth.

"So what? You might be hellbent on staying loyal to the King, but I am not. In fact, I'm sick of him and his orders. I was already sick before being sent on this futile expedition, and now, after witnessing all our soldiers die senseless deaths, I don't even care to pretend that I'm not."

Gilead raised a hand and rubbed his face tiredly.

The deaths of the soldiers weighed heavily on his soul, as well. He was sick and tired, as well.

But he just could not understand.

She was a Saint. A Transcendent champion of the Sword Domain, the best there was. Sure, not all Saints were retainers of the Great Clan Valor like he was. And even among the Knights, not everyone took their oaths as seriously as he did.

Some people were guided by greed and self-interest. Most people were simply lost.

But most Saints still had enough composure to keep their wits about them. What was she hoping to achieve? Were there others like her among the Transcendent champions of the Sword Domain, ready to abandon reason?

"You… refuse? You can't refuse."

The woman seemed to grin.

"Can't I? What are you going to do to stop me, Summer Knight? I admit, you are far stronger than me. You can kill me. You can overpower me. You can even drag me to the Citadel against my will. But… even if you do, you can't force me to claim it. You can't do anything."

Gilead just stared at her blankly.

Then, a hint of exasperated anger ignited in his piercing blue eyes.

"And then what? What happens after you flee to the waking world? Do you think that the King will just let you be?! Or are you planning to fight him, as well?! It's useless!"

The woman stared at him for a while, then sighed and opened her parasol.

Hiding in its shade, she shook her head.

"Is it useless, though?"

Gilead laughed.

"You don't know anything. You haven't seen anything. If you think that you can fight a Sovereign… if any of us, or even all of us can… then you are delusional. It is nothing but an exercise in futility."

The woman smiled again.

"I think not."

He stared at her somberly, and she shook her head again.

"I think that you are misunderstanding something very important, Summer Knight. You are right, I can't fight the King. It's hopeless… if I do, he'll kill me. But what happens after he kills me? Do you think that I'll be the last one to defy him? Is he going to kill everyone who disobeys his orders?"

The woman scoffed.

"We mere mortals are powerless in front of a Sovereign, because a Sovereign is like a god. His will is the divine will. But gods are also powerless in front of us mortals, because their divinity depends on a Domain, and Domains consist of people. What is he going to be the King of if people turn their backs on him, and he slaughters the people? The King of Nothing?"

Twirling her parasol, she took a step closer to Gilead and looked him in the eye.

"We mortals are not as powerless as you think. And our will is not as insignificant as it seems. But even if it is… well, to be frank, I don't care. I just don't give a damn anymore. I'm done with this farce."

As Gilead stared at her, struggling to find words to retort, the woman gave him a look of pity.

"Oh, and also… for Spell's sake. You swore a knightly oath of fealty to the Great Clan Valor, did you not? Well, the Great Clan Valor consists of many people. Find a less rotten one to be loyal to, you fool. By the dead gods, even Changing Star is an heir of Valor these days…"

With that…

The woman disappeared into thin air, having pulled on her tether to return to the waking world.

The vivid green radiance of her eyes faded, leaving only shades of white and grey in the world.

Left alone, Sir Gilead, the Summer Knight, tiredly lowered himself to the ground.

He had done all he could… more than he could, even.

But despite that, his mission had ended in failure.

Chapter-2209: Dark Waters

"She's coming back!"

The dark water boiled as the gargantuan horror rose from below. Its translucent carapace glistened like obsidian in the bright light of the luminous Memories, and the battered ships scattered, pushed aside by the turbulent waves.

The creature was too large to discern its full shape. The people struggling to stay on the splintered decks could only catch glimpses of its harrowing visage: the enormous black eyes, the jagged line of a dreadful mandible, the forest of titanic limbs, the flexible antennae that reached almost a kilometer into the air…

However, the ghastly depth dweller was not what made the people weary — they had battled plenty of terrifying abominations while sailing through the darkness of the Spine Ocean already, many of them far more dreadful and eerie than this one. The punitive expedition had lost most of its ship in the process, and plenty of warriors… but dying in a battle with Nightmare Creatures was a familiar thought to Awakened.

The murderous demon that hid in the darkness above was far more unnerving.

As the remaining forged Echoes tore into the dweller of the depths, breaking its carapace with steel fangs, their riders unleashed a barrage of harpoons and arrows into the cracks. Each was a powerful Memory capable of dealing immense harm — the Nightmare Creature sustained some damage, and while it was not seriously wounded yet, they managed to keep it away from the ships.

"There!"

Several brilliantly shining arrows shot into the air from the decks,

chasing away the darkness.

All darkness but a small formless mass of it.

The mass of darkness was falling as it twisted to avoid one of the arrows, and was then torn apart by a bright beam of incinerating energy that shot from one of the decks.

From within it, an enchanting figure was revealed.

A beautiful fiend with alabaster skin and obsidian hair plummeted from the sky, her black wings folded to increase the speed. Her armor was torn and broken, and her mesmerizing face was painted by blood. Several arrows protruded from her sides, slowly collapsing into a rain of sparks.

And yet, there was a chilling, cruel glint in the winged demon's onyx eyes.

"Don't let her reach the ships!"

But it was already too late.

Revel was too close.

She fell on the deck of the ship that had been washed away from the others at terrible speed, summoning her darkness at the last moment.

The Ascended warriors scrambled to assume a defensive formation, the melee fighters rushing forward as their less resilient comrades stepped back. A wall of shields and a palisade of spears barred her path, sorcerous flames dispelling true darkness that shrouded her like a veil.

The pursuers had long learned how to deal with her ambushes. She had managed to cull many of them at the start, eventually killing two of the Saints, but by now, every attack was a deadly gamble.

It was too easy to get bogged down, surrounded, and cut down…

However, that was alright. Because Revel was learning too.

Usually, she would have shot past the deck, either severing bodies or catching an enemy or two to throw them overboard before disappearing into the darkness. But this time, she did not — instead, she simply crashed into the damaged deck like a cannonball, piercing it in a cloud of splinters.

She pierced the entire ship.

As cold water washed over her, a litany of shouts bloomed above the damaged ship.

"She's gone!"

"Damn it, the hull is breached!"

"The cargo hold is flooding!"

"She's in the water!"

Revel spun and used her wings to push herself through the dark waters. Reaching the shattered hull of the ship, she used her claws to widen the breach, then spun again and pushed herself off the enchanted wood, into the depths.

Usually, the warriors of the Sword Domain would have been easily able to repair such damage to one of their ships. She would not have risked falling into the water, either, where the forged Echoes were waiting to tear her apart.

But the battered fleet was currently being besieged by the underwater horror. The Echoes were away, trying to breach its thick carapace, and the ships were scrambling to stay at a distance.

The vessel she had damaged would not sink, most likely… but they would take a lot of water, which would slow them down.

And make them a sitting duck.

Then, one of the four remaining Valor Saints would have to make a decision. They would either have to risk themselves to protect the damaged ship, or sacrifice it.

Either way, Revel would get a chance to take down one more Transcendent.

…If she survived that long, of course.

She was not doing too well herself.

Revel was strong, and Moonveil was strong as well. But it was just the two of them against seven Saints of the Sword Domain and their entire expedition. They had whittled the enemy numbers down over the long and harrowing voyage through the Spine Ocean… they killed some themselves, and killed others by luring the enemy ships into the maws of the horrors that dwelled in the darkness.

But the enemy had whittled Revel and Moonveil down, as well.

Their essence was exhausted. Their bodies were riddled with wounds. Their Memories and Echoes had been destroyed, and their supplies had long run dry. The dwellers of the depths were just as eager to consume them as they hungered for the souls and flesh of the pursuers.

The Citadel was drawing closer.

Revel knew that she would not be able to destroy the remains of the Sword Domain force before their ships reached the destination.

So… the outcome of this nightmare would most likely be decided in a desperate three-way battle between the daughters of Queen Song, the Saints of the Sword Domain, and the guardian of the Spine Ocean Citadel.

Whatever that horror was.

Chances were, the Nightmare Creature that had made its nest in the Citadel would be the final victor.

Gritting her teeth, she tore the remaining arrows out of her flesh and shattered them, feeling the poison that had coated the arrowheads struggle to paralyze her body.

A powerful current threw her away as a severed antenna of the

crustacean behemoth plummeted into the water from great heights, displacing countless tons of water.

'No time to waste, now…'

Folding her wings, Revel swam upward.

***

Some time later, she reached the crack in the dome of the dead god's spine that had served them as shelter last night. Dismissing her wings, Revel pushed her shredded body inside, fell on the uneven floor, and drew a laborious breath. Her Transcendent physique was already working on mending her mangled flesh, but even its staggering vitality was not enough to contend against the accumulated damage.

Soon, a pale light ignited in the crevice, and she saw Moonveil.

Her sister was sitting while leaning on a wall, her hands cradling a terrifying wound in her abdomen. She smiled weakly.

"How was the hunt?"

Revel tiredly shook her head.

"They lost two ships. But they still have four Saints."

She hesitated for a few moments, and then added quietly:

"We will leave as soon as I replenish a little essence. The Citadel is only a few hours away, now…"

Moonveil sighed.

"Do you think we'll manage to defeat the guardian, kill the Sword Saints, and conquer it?"

Revel exhaled slowly.

"Maybe… maybe not. We don't need to, anyway. Instead, we'll do what Seishan and Hel did — I'll stall the enemies, you'll find the

Gateway and claim it."

Her sister frowned.

"...And just leave you to die?"

Revel studied her face for a few moments, then laughed quietly.

"Gods, it seems you really lost a lot of blood. What are you thinking about, fool? Once you claim the Citadel, it will become a part of Mother's Domain. And once it becomes a part of her Domain, she will deal with the Sword Saints — and the guardian. I just need to survive until then."

Moonveil remained silent for a while.

Eventually, she said softly:

"Can you even manage that? I am warning you… don't even think about dying, Revel. I'll be very mad. Don't show your face in front of me if you do."

Revel did not respond, sensing how little strength was left in her battered body.

Finally, she smiled.

"Alright. Since you insist..."

Chapter-2210: Song, Vale

Two armies faced each other on a bone plain.

On one side, steel glistened and vermilion banners fluttered in the wind. On the other side, a legion of the dead stood silently in front of the somber soldiers, a myriad of eyes brimming with emptiness, fear, and grim anticipation.

The eyes of the warriors of the Sword Domain were not much different, full of dread and hopeless resignation.

The veil of grey clouds shone brilliantly in the distant sky, and the blinding light was making the bone plain shine as well, like the surface of a white-hot pan. The sweltering heat was suffocating, making the warriors of Song yearn for the cold snowstorms of Ravenheart, while the warriors of Valor yearned for the cool waters of the Mirror Lake.

Were they going to see their homes again?

No one knew, and most were too afraid to wonder.

The Seventh Royal Legion stood at the center of the Song Army. Seishan was in front of her soldiers, looking across the battlefield solemnly. Cassie was by her side, silent and motionless, her movements restricted by the invisible strings of the Queen's power.

The Blood Sisters — those who were still alive — were interspersed among the soldiers, their red garments standing out among the sea of steel, leather, and scale. Felise was among them, a complicated mix of emotions hiding in the depths of her beautiful eyes.

Rain, Tamar, Ray, and Fleur were not too far from where the former Handmaiden stood, keeping quiet — just like the rest of the army was. An eerie silence settled on the bone plain, as if everyone was

either unwilling or unable to make a sound.

Somewhere else in the formation of the Song Army was the Saint of Sorrow. There were also Dar of the Maharana Clan, Saint Ceres, and Saint Siord — among many others Transcendent champions. Their faces were just as tired and grim as those of the Awakened soldiers.

On the flanks of the vast battle formation, hordes of enthralled Nightmare Creatures were waiting for their mistress to give them a command. Beastmaster herself was among them, her hand resting on the scales of a hideous abomination. Her tantalizing face was even paler than usual, dark embers burning in her bewitching eyes.

She was looking at the sea of enemy warriors in the distance.

The formation of the Sword Army was more organized and resplendent than that of the soldiers of Song. Knights of Valor stood in its center, and the Ivory Island hovered above.

Master Sunless and Aiko stood on the emerald grass, looking down silently.

Far below, the Lord of Shadows was leaning indifferently on his fearsome odachi, his white hair moving slightly in the wind. His demonic mask did not reveal any emotion, and there was nothing but darkness in the fierce slits of its eyes.

Some distance away, Nephis was standing in front of a row of an orderly phalanx of heavily armored soldiers. Her slender figure was obscured only by the thin fabric of a light tunic, and her longsword rested easily on her shoulder. Her hair reflected the sunlight, flowing in the wind like a beautiful stream of incandescent silver.

The Fire Keepers were just behind her. Among them, Sid was suffering silently from the unbearable heat. Letting out a sigh, she opened her canteen, drank from it greedily, then shook the flask a couple of times and dropped it on the ground.

Not too far, the White Feather clan stood, ready for battle. Saint Tyris and Saint Roan were in front of the Awakened warriors of their clan, while their daughter, Telle, was among them. All three seemed calm,

but the wind was turbulent in that part of the battlefield, betraying hidden emotions.

The other Saints of the Sword Army were similarly tense. Saint Rivalen seemed to have lost some of his gallant poise, staring across the battlefield with a frown. Somewhere else, Jest was leaning on his cane, looking at the ground with a dark expression.

For the first time in a long while, he felt too old to face the dire demands of the world ruled by the Nightmare Spell.

His grandson, Master Mercy of the Dagonet clan, was among the soldiers of the Sword Army. Rivalen's son, Tristan, was there as well.

And countless others.

Countless souls were waiting for the battle to start on both sides of the white bone plain, shivering with dread and trepidation.

They were waiting for the war horns to sing. For the battle to start.

And for the war to end.

However, the command to attack never came.

Instead, two figures appeared from the rows of soldiers, walking calmly across the surface of the ancient bone as the titanic skull loomed in the distance, watching them with a silent gaze.

One was a tall man with dark hair and cold, steely eyes. He was clad in heavy dark armor, emanating a suffocating aura of dominance and oppression. A vermilion cloak fluttered behind him like a wave, its vibrant color in sharp contrast with his bleak, ruthless gaze.

He was Anvil of Valor, the King of Swords.

The other was a breathtakingly beautiful woman in a regal red dress, walking across the vast expanse of bone with calm, mesmerizing grace. Her skin was pale like that of a corpse, and a light smile played on her crimson lips. Her raven-black hair was like a lustrous waterfall of darkness, and there was something eerie and vaguely appalling about her beautiful, enchanting eyes.

She was Ki Song, the Raven Queen… the Queen of Worms.

The two Sovereigns walked unhurriedly across the battlefield, their human figures looking small and insignificant in comparison to the vast armies behind them… and at the same time, larger than the world itself.

Eventually, they met in the middle.

To one side, the towering black wall of the Hollow Mountains reached toward the sky, the jagged peaks shrouded in white mist. The colossal skull rested on the misty slopes, staring down at them like an evil omen.

To the other side, Godgrave stretched into the distance. Its surface, which had once been overtaken by the scarlet jungle, was now immaculate and white, cleansed of the abominable infestations by the efforts of the two great armies.

Anvil and Ki Song studied each other silently for a few moments. The King maintained a cold and harsh expression, while the Queen was smiling faintly.

Eventually, she was the first one to break the silence. This time, Ki Song did not use the dead youths, using her own voice to speak.

"Vale."

Anvil responded evenly:

"Song."

She remained silent for a bit, then chuckled suddenly.

"Ah… I've imagined this moment so many times, you know? Wondering what I would feel, what words I would say. But now that the moment has actually come… I find that I have nothing to say to you at all."

Anvil just stared at her coldly.

"I can't say that I've spared you a lot of thought, myself."

Ki Song smiled.

Then, looking away, she let out a quiet sigh — or at least pretended to, controlling her puppet with flawless skill.

After a short pause, she suddenly asked:

"By any chance… do you remember the first time we met?"

He pondered for a second or two, then shook his head slightly.

"I don't particularly recall, no. Was it at the Academy?"

Ki Song glanced at him briefly.

"No. It was at the party in honor of the Immortal Flame, I think? We were children then. So many years have passed, and so many things have happened. The world has changed so much since then… who would have predicted how those kids would end up? How the Immortal Flame clan would end up, as well."

She paused for a moment.

"Did you know that the walls of the Academy were breached, by the way? For the first time since its establishment… and it wasn't by a Nightmare Creature. They had withstood the perils of the Nightmare Spell for thirty-six years. But they didn't withstand us."

Anvil smiled coldly.

"Why? Are you feeling sentimental?"

Ki Song studied him for a bit, then grinned.

"Can't I? You are the last friend I have in this world, after all. And after today, I will have none."

He just looked at her evenly.

"Were we ever friends? I don't think so. Then again, you'll be truly dead after today, and the dead don't need friends. So don't feel too sad."

Ki Song laughed.

"That's it? After all these years, after everything we've done, you really have nothing to say?"

Anvil shrugged.

"Words are meaningless. They are meaningless by now, at least… both of us have already said everything. What else is there left to say?"

Ki Song sighed.

"Well, you aren't wrong. Prepare to die, then. You are already no different from a corpse, so killing you will simply be mercy."

Hearing these words, he smiled darkly.

"Funny to hear something like that from you, of all people."

She lingered for a while, then smiled, as well.

"...Yes. You are right, it is a bit funny."

As she finished saying those words, the world shuddered.

Chapter-2211: Wielders of Power

A cold wind blew across the sweltering expanse of Godgrave, making the soldiers shiver. As Ki Song looked at Anvil with a faint smile, the legion of the dead stirred. A vast breach opened in their silent wall as numerous puppets moved, clearing a path directly to the battle formation of the Song Army.

However, that path did not stay open for long.

A moment later, the air trembled, and was split apart as a vertical fracture cut the world. Then, it expanded, and for the first time in thousands of years, snow fell on the scorching surface of the ancient bone.

As the Dream Gate opened, a raging snowstorm became visible in its towering fissure. A magnificent black palace could be vaguely seen in the billowing snow, as well as the mountain it stood upon.

The clouds of snow that escaped the Dream Gate instantly melted, the water boiling and evaporating as a searing haze obscured the front rows of the Song soldiers.

Anvil observed the scene calmly.

"Curious. How are you able to anchor the Dream Gate in the same realm it is rooted to?"

Ki Song shrugged gracefully.

"It is a Component of the Night Garden… why, you did not know?"

There was a subtle mocking note in her, but he did not react.

"The Night Garden… huh, makes sense. Storm God is the god of guidance and travel, after all, and that ship was made to sail the darkness of her Sea."

His gaze shifted from the towering rift in reality to Ki Song.

"Was that the reason why you fed the House of Night to that abomination?"

She lingered with the answer, then chuckled.

"I hoped you would show at least a little trepidation, old friend. But you are too far gone, aren't you? What will it take to make you flinch?"

Ki Song shook her head.

"I took the Night Garden. I took the other Citadels of the Stormsea, too. Rivergate is gone, and Bastion has fallen. My kingdom is stronger than ever before, while you don't even have enough Saints to rule yours… can you feel it, Vale? Can you feel your Domain crumbling?"

Anvil remained silent for a few moments, looking at her impassively.

"Why should I care?"

Then, however, his expression changed subtly.

Ki Song's smile disappeared, replaced by a cold and vicious expression.

"Can you feel it now?"

He looked down, at the bone surface beneath their feet, as if trying to pierce it with his gaze. His eyes darkened slightly, expressing a hint of contempt.

"I see… you've taken the Spine Ocean, after all. The men I sent to kill your daughters are dying... they are dead. And the Citadels they ruled are now without a master."

Ki Song looked at him silently with no particular expression, and for

a moment, she looked like what she was — a flawlessly preserved, masterfully controlled corpse.

Anvil met her gaze calmly.

"How useless. Do you feel confident now that you have amassed all that power, Song?"

The beautiful corpse smiled.

"It does feel nice."

He shook his head.

"That has always been your blind spot. From our days at the Academy until now, you have always been controlled by your sense of inferiority… and you have always pursued power to spare yourself from feeling inferior. It would have been amusing if it wasn't so pitiful, banal, and distasteful. But then again, what else would one expect from someone of your breed?"

Anvil looked at her coldly.

"Someone like you, who was born with nothing, can't really understand the meaning of power. Power has its uses, sure… but at the end of the day, power itself is meaningless. It is the person who wields it that matters. So why should I flinch? You can take the Citadels of the Stormsea, Song. You can destroy Rivergate. You can even slaughter my Saints — but it won't matter. Because at the end of the day, you will still have to face me."

He regarded her with a hint of disdain.

"And I... am superior. I was forged from purer steel, and no matter how much power you gain, we will never be equals."

Ki Song laughed quietly.

She fell silent for a few moments, then faced him with melancholy in her eyes.

"And only someone like you can really think that I was born with

nothing."

As the cold winds of Ravenheart blew across the sweltering expanse of Godgrave, she took a deep breath and then looked up, at the merciless grey sky.

"Were you forged from purer steel than Broken Sword, too?"

A shadow ran across Anvil's face.

He answered evenly:

"Naturally."

Ki Song smiled.

"Is that why you had to make a deal with the Dreamspawn? I guess your steel was not pure enough to defeat someone… of his breed… yourself."

Anvil answered her smile with a cold one of his own.

"You make it sound as if you weren't there, killing him with me. Why, do you regret it now? Do you wish you made a different choice?"

She shook her head slowly.

"No… you and I both know that it was necessary. Just like erasing all traces of Immortal Flame was necessary. If someone seems to be having regrets, it's you, Vale. Otherwise, you would not have allowed his daughter to grow into someone neither of us can easily eliminate."

Ki Song looked at him calmly.

"I'll correct your mistake after you die, though. Don't worry."

As she said those words, a subtle smell of iron suddenly permeated the air, and Anvil's oppressive presence grew much deeper and terrifyingly sharp, as if it had finally awoken after slumbering all this time.

He shook his head.

"For someone who supposedly had nothing to say, you sure talked a lot. Enough. Let us solve this once and for all. Let us see who is worthy of wearing the crown."

Lowering her head for a moment, Ki Song smiled.

"Farewell, Vale."

Anvil summoned his helmet, and his voice rustled in the wind like the clamor of a myriad of blades:

"...Farewell to you, too, Song."

A hurricane of scarlet sparks drowned the world.

Chapter-2212: Battle Royale

Far away from the sweltering heat of Godgrave, high in the frigid cold of Ravenheart, a magnificent black palace was shrouded by the veil of a raging snowstorm. As the winds howled, a low and reverberating sound echoed in the snow, making the people in the city across the great bridge freeze and turn their heads.

There was the groan of stone, and then, the towering main gates of the black palace opened wide for the first time in countless years.

Beyond the gates nestled deep, dreadful darkness.

A moment later, grotesque shapes emerged from the darkness and entered into the light, moving indifferently through the lethal cold of the snowstorm.

A vast, seemingly endless river of marching dead was flowing out of the black palace, across the stone bridge, and into the towering fissure of the Dream Gate. There were Nightmare Creatures of all shapes and forms in that river, as well as countless humans.

The puppets differed from each other in shape, in size… but a few of them were far more terrifying than all the rest.

Those were the puppets made from the corpses of slain Titans.

As the hurricane of scarlet sparks was giving birth to a vast storm of swords, the first of the Titans passed through the Dream Gate, stepping onto the surface of the dead god's breastbone.

The world quaked under its footsteps.

The dead that stood in front of the Sword Army had seemed like a legion, but now that the icy halls of Ravenheart opened, their numbers suddenly looked paltry and insignificant.

The soldiers of both armies watched in stunned silence as the endless procession of the Queen's puppets marched from the billowing snow, the flow of them never ceasing until an entire army of the dead flooded the bone plain, all of them staring at the boundless clouds of swords with eerie, empty gazes.

The Titans towered above them like grotesque mountains of flesh, some of them so gargantuan that they had barely squeezed through the immense fissure of the Dream Gate.

The sea of puppets faced the storm of swords, with two Sovereigns facing each other in the middle.

It was then that the soldiers of the two great armies finally realized what it meant, and what was about to happen.

The two gods of humanity were going to clash, and fight each other until one of them was dead.

Some soldiers shuddered from relief, realizing that they would not enter battle today. Others simply looked at the astonishing scene in silent awe.

More still were terrified, knowing that mortals like them were not fit to see gods fight. The battles of Transcendent had already threatened to reap their lives as collateral damage… what kind of calamity would be unleashed when Supremes clashed?

Somewhere in the battle formation of the Song Army, Revel and Moonveil suddenly appeared out of thin air, carried to Godgrave by one of the Song Saints after returning to the waking world from the darkness of the Spine Ocean. Both were bloodied and battered — Revel especially, her mangled body covered in countless wounds.

As someone ran to bring the healers, she fell to one knee and looked up with a pale face. Her eyes widened.

…The corpses of the four Sword Saints they had brought with them moved, rising from the ground to join the army of the dead.

Across the sea of the puppets and the storm of swords, in the formation of the Sword Army, Summer Knight appeared in a similar

fashion. His body was in a better state than those of the Queen's daughters, but his gaze was bleak and dark, devoid of its usual shine.

He looked at the battlefield silently, then lowered his gaze, lingered for a few long moments, and then summoned his armor and his weapons.

Almost at the same time, seven dreadful swords fell from the sky, stopping to hover behind Anvil. He raised an arm, and one of them landed into his hand.

The world itself seemed to shift, as if being bent and torn by the eerie grey blade.

Ki Song looked at the terrifying sword calmly.

"I see you are still a consummate collector. A Sacred blade, is it?"

Anvil lowered his head, the vermilion plume of his helmet moving slightly. His indifferent voice sounded even as he answered, aiming the sword at the unarmed Queen.

"It's still a disappointment… but it will do. At least I'm not in the habit of playing with dead dolls."

Ki Song laughed, her voice drowning in the rustle of countless swords.

"I have some living dolls, as well."

With that, her smile dimmed, replaced by a cold and dark expression. Fearsome, predatory crimson flames ignited in her eyes.

"These toys won't save you."

...A moment later, she was suddenly in front of Anvil. Her bare hand crashed into his breastplate, denting it. Her fingers left deep grooves on the enchanted metal, almost tearing through it.

The force of her blow was fearsome enough to produce a devastating shockwave, pushing the King of Swords a couple steps back.

At the same time, the sea of puppets surged forward like a tide.

The storm of swords had blotted out the radiant grey sky, casting a deep shadow on the battlefield. Now, the swords plummeted from the height, as if the sky itself was falling on the dead army. The flying swords shone as they fell, reflecting the blinding light, and for a moment, it seemed as if the entire world was aflame.

When the cloud of steel collided with the tide of the dead, the burning world seemed to shatter.

The power of the impacts was so immense that they produced blinding flashes of light and waves of unbearable heat. Some of the puppets were torn apart, while some were severely damaged.

However, more still dodged or deflected the flying swords, moving with the cold and calculated skill of sublime warriors. A skill like that was a harrowing weapon in the hands of a being who controlled the mighty body of a Nightmare Creature — after all, it was the skill and intellect that gave the weak humans a chance in battles against the abominable vessels of Corruption.

And more harrowing still…

Was the fact that the flesh of many puppets cut by the swords simply mended itself, erasing most of the damage.

They were not living beings, after all. And since the Queen could control her puppets intricately enough to make them rot or restore themselves from being rotten, she could erase these cuts, as well.

As the heat, the light, and the weakened shockwaves reached the two armies, the soldiers backed away, horrified by the cataclysmic collision.

…The colossal skull watched silently, though, having witnessed far more dreadful battles.

Chapter-2213: A Hundred Thousand Deaths

The soldiers watched the battle between the Sovereigns in stunned, breathless silence. To them, it looked apocalyptic.

The sea of the dead and the celestial river of rustling swords had intertwined into a vast storm of devastation, with mangled pieces of severed flesh and shards of shattered metal obscuring the battlefield like a chilling haze. The bone plain continued to tremble as if from a powerful earthquake, the violent tremors throwing countless soldiers to the ground. The cacophony of the unfathomable battle was overwhelming and deafening, and the winds it had given birth to were strong enough to make the Awakened warriors stagger and sway.

It seemed as if the sky itself would break apart and fall… or rather, overflow with incandescent radiance, countless rays of incinerating sunlight pouring through the breaches in the cloud to annihilate the cowering armies.

However, the Cloudveil still held — perhaps because the Sovereigns had chosen to preserve it, perhaps because Saint Tyris of White Feather still struggled to maintain it.

The Sovereigns themselves were like two tiny specks in the vast, calamitous carnage of the world-ending confrontation. And yet, it was impossible to miss them even in the mayhem — wherever the two collided, the storm of swords was torn apart, and the sea of puppets receded, leaving countless pulverized corpses in its wake.

Ki Song and Anvil fought on the ground, and they fought in the air. The power of their blows was so devastating that air itself was displaced and burned away, creating vast pockets of vacuum above the quaking battlefield. The wind rushed to fill the void, causing

hurricane gales and furious twisters to move across the surface of the ancient bone, and deafening thunderclaps rolling above it.

Few were able to discern the details of the royal battle, but those who could saw Anvil defending himself with his seven dreadful swords as Ki Song attacked with her bare hands like a fierce beast. Her movements were so fast that it seemed as if she simply disappeared from one spot to appear in another — sometimes nearby, sometimes hundreds of meters away.

The King was like a statue of black steel, his fluttering cloak and the plume of his helmet framing it with brushes of vibrant vermilion. The Queen was like a beautiful goddess of blood, her regal dress flowing like a vivid red stream in the shadow cast by the myriad of flying swords. Two great wings tore through the porcelain skin of her back, spreading open as drops of crimson blood fell from the black feathers.

Anvil's armor bent and rippled as Ki Song's nails pushed and cut into the mystical metal. However, it repaired itself as swiftly as it was damaged, remaining immaculate and pristine — for now, at least, the Queen had not been able to make the King bleed.

Which was why he was still alive, perhaps, considering that her Dormant Ability allowed Ki Song to aggravate any wound. That Ability had been slow, but deadly when she was a Sleeper… now that she was Supreme, the smallest scratch received in her presence could very well mean instant death.

That was why Anvil chose a steady and methodical sword technique, concentrating on defense while manipulating the indestructible metal of his enchanted heavy armor to maintain its flawless integrity.

However, even though he was mostly defending himself against the Queen's attacks — each of them seemingly devastating enough to erase entire settlements off the map — that was not all Anvil did.

His six dreadful swords were moving around him, creating a rustling sphere of metal. The seventh, the most terrifying of them all, rested solidly in his hand. The cursed blade parried and deflected Ki Song's blows, shooting forward from time to time to pierce her flesh.

The Queen seemed wary of the cursed sword… however, she did not put too much effort into avoiding its touch.

Time and time again, Anvil's sword cut her. The ruthless blade tore through Ki Song savagely, dealing her harrowing wounds...

Or rather, it should have.

Strangely enough, though, no wounds were left on the Queen's body when the sword retreated after delivering her a fatal blow. It was as if she was a ghost made of water — or maybe blood — and the grey steel simply passed through her without leaving a trace.

If one was very attentive, however, and possessed the inhuman ability to parse through the calamitous chaos of the great battle with their mind, taking all of it in at the same time, they would have noticed a curious detail.

Every time Ki Song received a lethal wound and ignored it without as much as a wince, one of her puppets far below fell to the ground, its body gruesomely severed.

Anvil did not seem surprised by what was happening at all.

Deflecting another attack and pushing Ki Song's hand away, he sent one of the six flying swords barreling forward. The Queen was a split second too late to react, and the cold steel passed through her slender neck. She should have been beheaded, but instead, there was not even a mark left on her skin. Her other arm shot forward, striking Anvil in the chest.

The world shuddered from the dire power of her blow, and the obliterating shockwave rolled upward, threatening to disrupt the veil of radiant clouds.

The King sneered behind the dark steel of his helmet.

"This... is going to be tedious."

He mended his armor a moment after it was almost torn by Ki Song's hand, then raised his own, grabbing the second of the seven terrifying swords from the air.

Wielding two blades now, Anvil effortlessly switched from his defensive battle art to a reckless, aggressive style that abandoned caution in favor of an overwhelming offensive might.

His black figure exploded forward, flying across the sky with dreadful speed.

The two of them collided high above the battlefield, raising a hurricane with the sheer dreadful force of the thunderous impact.

"How many of these puppets do you have, now? Tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands? Well, it doesn't matter. I'll kill you a hundred thousand times if that is what it takes."

Ki Song laughed.

"I wish I could enjoy killing you a hundred thousand times, as well!"

With that, she pushed one of the swords away, battered another one to the side with her fist, and grappled Anvil in the air. Her raven wings pushed against the blinding sky, and then, both of them plummeted from the height, falling toward the bone plane.

Ki Song rammed Anvil into the ground with harrowing force, making the entire plain shudder.

A powerful quake threw thousands of soldiers off their feet, and the ancient bone fractured, thousands of sharp shards flying in all directions like a vast cloud of spreading shrapnel.

Standing among the soldiers of the Sword Domain, the Lord of Shadows looked down and stared at one of the bone shards rolling to his feet.

His fearsome mask remained expressionless.

'Crazy bastards. They are actually breaking the bone...'

Chapter-2214: Dark and Cold

The soldiers of the two great armies were cowering in front of the startling fury of the clash between the two demigods, their faces pale, their eyes opened wide in awe and terror.

…Sunny was not feeling too brave at the moment, himself.

Leaning on the hilt of his odachi while the tip of its blade rested on the ground, he was observing the battle intently. His black mask remained expressionless, but the man behind it had a grim expression on his face.

The soldiers were merely witnessing the clash, after all. They were frightened by the obliterating forces that the two Sovereigns were unleashing, but what they feared was becoming collateral damage in the dreadful fight, at most.

Sunny, however, would soon be facing these monsters in battle himself. He would experience the indescribable terror of their inhuman power himself. So, his wariness was far less theoretical.

'Too strong, too fast…'

The Sovereigns were indeed far beyond any Saint. Even Sunny, who was a Transcendent Titan, was not anywhere near their level of strength. He was struggling to follow their movements with his eyes, and any one of the countless harrowing blows they rained upon each other would have left his body broken and mangled.

Their power was simply tyrannical.

However, in and of itself, it was not too terrible.

He had faced and killed plenty of Great Nightmare Creatures, after all… to the point that fighting them ceased to feel like the stuff of

dark and dreadful legends. Many of them had been faster and stronger than Ki Song and Anvil were, capable of toppling mountains and reshaping landscapes with their blows.

They had died under his blade nonetheless.

There was a different plane to the battle between the Sovereigns, though, one that few could perceive.

Sunny could not perceive it, either… but he knew that it was happening out there, in the vast storm of rustling swords, reshaping reality itself.

Just as the King and the Queen were engaged in a physical battle, their Wills were battling each other, as well.

Perhaps Anvil's impossibly durable armor was only remaining whole because he willed it to be. Because Ki Song's bare hands could bend and break the armor because she wanted them to.

The sea of puppets and the hurricane of swords were merely extensions of their mortal bodies, as well. They were expressions of their dire power. Every time a flying sword pierced a dead puppet, and each time dead hands closed around the cold steel of a flying sword, the two wills clashed with each other, too.

He was not knowledgeable enough about the Will, but he was sure that the Sovereigns were wielding it with just as much skill as they would any weapon. And just like a weapon, the Will was a deadly tool in their hands.

Perhaps the real battle was happening on that conceptual plane, unseen by all except the two Supremes themselves.

There was another level to their clash, as well — one that made Sunny's head ache. It was the clash between the Domains of the two Sovereigns, which… had some effect both on how much strength they could express, and how sharp their Will could become.

Perhaps.

He was not sure.

Ki Song had decided to have the battle on the Breastbone Reach, which was a strange choice. Here was the territory of the King of Swords, after all — she was surrounded by his Domain from all sides, which had to be a great disadvantage, stifling her power.

However, just before they clashed, everything changed.

Sunny could not quite perceive it, but he did sense it… a subtle shift in the very nature of the world around them. It must have happened because somewhere far below, Revel finally conquered the Spine Ocean Citadel — Ki Song gained more authority over Godgrave, and the boundary of her own land pushed against Anvil's sphere of influence from the depths of the dark ocean.

And then there was the Dream Gate, which seemed to have opened to the snowy vista of Ravenheart… somehow.

Sunny knew that the Dream Gates served as conduits of Supreme power — whenever they appeared, the surrounding land became a part of the Sovereign's Domain. That was how Anvil and Ki Song were able to bring their Domains to the waking world during the Chain of Nightmares and eliminate the Gate Guardians that had emerged during the Battle of the Black Skull.

Ravenheart was now directly connected to Godgrave, spreading the Queen's influence to this godforsaken land… most likely.

So, a fragile equilibrium was formed, with the two Sovereigns fighting on the boundary where their Domains pushed against each other, creating neutral ground.

Sunny had to keep all that in mind.

He had to watch, and wait… and when both of the Sovereigns exhausted their powers, he would have to enter the fray and face their chilling, tyrannical power himself.

Side by side with Nephis, of course.

Would they really be able to win?

Well… now, they had no choice.

Because they had already made it.

He closed his eyes for a moment, feeling the weight of that choice pressing down on him like a crushing burden.

For a moment, Sunny allowed himself to be weak and unsure.

He felt sick. He felt disgusted with himself.

'I am… the most hypocritical person in the world, aren't I?'

Two worlds, even.

That was because the moment Nephis had chosen the path of no return, leaving herself no other option but to defeat the Sovereigns and become one herself, she had made a choice for the countless mundane humans living in the Sword and Song Domains, as well.

And Sunny… Sunny was her willing accomplice.

Should they fail, millions of people would die.

Opening his eyes, Sunny looked at the unfathomable carnage of the great battle in front of him.

The scale of it let him reel.

'...I can't fail, then. I simply can't.'

He gritted his teeth.

Just as always, Weaver's Mask betrayed no emotion.

But the shadows throughout the Sword Army suddenly grew deeper and colder.

Endlessly deep, and infinitely cold…

Chapter-2215: Il Principe

A tide of enchantments washed over Ki Song, pressing her into the shattered surface of the broken bone. Her wings broke with a revolting crunch, the black feathers becoming soaked with blood. Her red dress rustled, the rich fabric tearing under the immense weight.

The frayed threads moved as if possessing a life of their own, however, repairing the tears a moment later.

The wings were mended, as well — only to be broken once again, and mend themselves once more.

Using that brief lull in the onslaught of attacks, Anvil rushed forward with impossible speed. His twin swords fell like the blades of a guillotine, one aimed at her neck, the other at her abdomen. This time, there was something different about the way the sharp steel hissed as it cut the air… as if the swords were not simply cutting space, but slicing the fabric of reality itself apart.

Ki Song looked up fiercely just before the two blades fell on her kneeling figure. Instead of seeking to avoid them, she shot forward. A cloud of bone shards exploded backward from under her foot, and as a blinding flash drowned the battlefield for a moment, she collided with Anvil at a dreadful speed.

The force of the impact made the world tremble. Anvil retracted his swords at the last possible moment, leaving two deep cuts on Ki Song's arms before blocking her palm with the crossed blades. A hurricane rose, cleaving the storm of rustling swords apart, and the devastating shockwave sent thousands of puppets flying.

This time, however, no puppet received the wound for the puppet master. The cuts remained on the Queen's porcelain skin, swelling with crimson blood.

As Anvil slid dozens of meters back, and she rushed forward to pursue, a vicious smile twisted her lips.

"A will sharp enough to cut the world!"

A moment later, her delicate hands descended upon the King like a crushing tide. A litany of deafening thunderclaps consumed the battlefield, fusing into a continuous roar — Ki Song's graceful figure seemed to blink in and out of existence as she moved around Anvil, delivering a hundred devastating blows from all directions in less than a second.

The bone plain quaked.

"A soul vast enough to encompass the heavens!"

With a snarl, she delivered one last blow — the most dreadful of them yet. Five of Anvil's swords were batted away, and he blocked her soft palm with the last two blades. The impact was so terrible that a furious explosion blossomed from the point where her skin touched the cold steel, washing the world in light and flame.

Anvil withstood the attack calmly, but a deep crack spread through the ancient bone from beneath his feet, cutting it like an ugly scar.

Ki Song laughed as she danced away from his retaliation, her red dress flowing behind her like a stream of blood.

"A heart cold enough to extinguish the flames of hell!"

As he lost his balance and fell, she lunged forward with a wicked smile.

"Aren't you a marvel to behold, Vale?"

Scattering the five swords with a powerful wave of her mighty black wings, she mounted Anvil like a beast, raised her hands, and clenched them into fists.

"A monarch among monarchs…"

The first of the obliterating blows fell down upon him, causing more

thunder, more light, more heat…

The blades of the swords Anvil used to protect himself were already glowing red.

Somewhere else on the battlefield, the dead Titans were standing like tall mountains in the storm of flying swords. The lesser puppets were shredded and cut down, but these colossal abominations were too vast, too dreadful, and too powerful to be destroyed easily.

They walked across the bone plain, converging slowly on the spot where the two Sovereigns were locked in a deadly brawl, and the world itself shook under their footsteps.

The storm of swords raged, aiming to bar their path and destroy them. Each of the gargantuan abominations was surrounded by a great maelstrom of rustling steel, countless sharp blades shredding their flesh in a vain attempt to bring the giants down.

However, the body of a Titan, even a dead one, was as resilient as it was colossal — some were covered by unbreakable armor, some by thick layers of impossibly tough hide. Some were like crawling mountains of misshapen flesh, all damage dealt to it healing in a matter of moments.

Despite the harrowing force the flying swords unleashed, the Titans did not fall… and neither did they stop.

Up to a point.

The hurricane of swords suddenly twisted, the myriad of blades forming countless runes around the marching giants. Then, the runes ignited with an ominous scarlet glow, and streams of ethereal red light connected them like rivers.

The scarlet rivers formed nets that surrounded the Titans… or cages, perhaps. The bars of the sorcerous cages were intangible, and yet, the gargantuan abomination crashed into them as if they were made from solid metal.

The bone plain shuddered as the dead giants collided against the rays of scarlet light, staggered, and came to a halt.

Some distance away, Anvil was still unharmed under the barrage of Ki Song's fierce attacks. Even though the surface of the ancient bone around them was riddled with cracks, his dark armor remained intact, and his body remained unbroken.

Laying on the ground, he sneered coldly.

"...I am."

A moment later, five of the seven dreadful swords pierced Ki Song's body from behind, while the sixth pierced her heart. Anvil released its hilt, wrapped his fingers around her neck, and shot into the sky, dragging her with him.

"A marvel to behold, a monarch among monarchs — and so much more."

As they soared high enough to almost touch the Cloudveil, he turned the visor of his helmet to Ki Song and said with a hint of indifference in his cold, ruthless voice:

"What are you?"

With that, he strained his muscles and tossed Ki Song down.

She plummeted through the hurricane of swords like a crimson comet, being pierced and cut. A moment later, the strike of the seventh sword — the cursed sword — caught up with her, tearing the hurricane apart.

Ki Song impacted the ground with a force so terrible that the shockwave produced by her fall not only tossed the surrounding puppets down, but actually ripped them to pieces. Those closest to her were pulverized into clouds of crimson haze, while those further away were merely torn into tiny pieces of flesh.

A vast net of cracks snaked through the surface of the ancient bone, surrounding her like a dark spiderweb.

At the heart of that web, Ki Song struggled to stand up.

The six swords, however, were still lodged in her body, impaling her

and keeping her bent to the ground.

Anvil landed a few steps away and walked toward her, raising the seventh sword.

His voice echoed from behind the black steel of his helmet:

"...You are nothing."

Ki Song let out a raspy chuckle.

"Aren't you the kind of man to fear nothing, though?"

Before the cursed sword could fall, the enchanting figure of the Queen seemed to blur as she assumed her Transcendent form.

A moment later, a great flood of crimson blood rushed forward, escaping the cage of six terrifying swords and threatening to consume Anvil.

Chapter-2216: Crimson River

The tide of blood Ki Song had turned into was vast enough to fill a sea, rushing forward like a crimson flood. The glistening red river moved above the ground, twisting in the air like a living creature — the flowing wave of it rose high above the battlefield, instantly dwarfing the stalwart figure of the King of Swords.

It seemed impossible that so much blood had been contained within the small and fragile vessel of a human body… and yet, reality was undeniable.

Anvil had met Ki Song's devastating blows without flinching, but he seemed reluctant to allow the crimson tide to touch him. As soon as Ki Song assumed her Transcendent form, scarlet runes ignited on his black armor, and he used his powers to levitate back, instantly creating distance between them.

The blood river breached that distance in the blink of an eye, though, covering hundreds of meters in a split second. Anvil continued to retreat, using his seven blades to create a shimmering sphere of steel around him.

As he soared into the sky and the crimson wave pursued, it swallowed countless flying swords. Moments later, the swords dissolved within it, breaking down into streams of scarlet sparks. The sparks were then absorbed by the glistening blood, leaving no trace behind.

From a distance, it looked as if a glistening crimson ribbon was dancing fluidly in the air, gliding through the storm of swords. It was just that the immense scale of that ribbon was hard to fathom... its surface shone with a beautiful red glow when the sunlight fell on it, and anyone who saw that glow felt their own blood start to boil.

Sunny felt it, as well… Blood Weave seemed to respond to the

presence of the Queen, rushing through his veins at greater speed than before. His heartbeat accelerated.

'They're going to obliterate the entire plain…'

The Titans were still struggling to free themselves of the sorcerous cages. The fury of their devastating struggle made the battlefield quake, and the surface of the ancient bone was slowly chipping under their feet… for those of the dead giants who had feet, of course.

The clash between the Sovereigns themselves was even more tyrannical. As Anvil escaped the glistening river of blood, unleashing a thousand enchantments to harm it, he plummeted to the ground several times, only turning to fly along the surface at the last possible moment.

Ki Song seemed less agile in the immensity of her destructive Transcendent form, though, so she couldn't turn quite as sharply.

Instead, the flood of blood simply crashed into ancient bone with the force of a devastating tsunami… if that tsunami was brimming with Supreme soul essence, wielded the Will, and consisted entirely of blood that belonged to a descendant of Beast God — who was the god of blood, as well.

Each time, the crimson tide drowned a portion of the battlefield and then reformed itself, leaving the battlefield broken.

A deep, reverberating groan resounded from somewhere deep underground, and Sunny saw a crack snake across the surface of the ancient bone.

It almost reached the point where the Seventh Royal Legion was positioned, the soldiers paralyzed by shock and awe of the deific battle. Many of them were already sprawled on the ground, unable to keep their balance in the middle of the violent earthquake, but Rain was still standing.

Sunny, who hid in her shadow, was far more powerful than any of the Song soldiers. However, even he was stunned by the harrowing violence the Sovereigns had unleashed to kill each other.

And they were only starting…

'Too powerful...'

[...ny… Su… Sunny?]

The voice was almost too weak to hear, but he did. It resounded inside his head, muffled and distant, but still undeniably familiar.

Sunny stirred.

[Cassie? Can you speak again?]

There was a long pause, and then, her voice came to him again:

[The Queen seems… to be… distracted, a little. So, her grasp has grown a little loose. I still can't reach anyone else, but you… close…]

Sunny was indeed close to Cassie — this incarnation of his was, at least, no more than a hundred meters away from the spot where she stood side by side with Seishan. So, it was easy to understand why she could reach him with her powers, but not anyone else.

He had so many questions, and not enough time to ask them all.

So, he asked the most important question first:

[Are you alright?]

Cassie remained silent for a few moments. Eventually, though, the deafening burden of her silence was broken:

[...fine.]

Sunny let out a relieved sigh.

Her voice grew a little louder, as if she was straining to make herself heard:

[Listen… important. The Queen's Ascended Ability… transference. She can transfer any harm dealt to her body to one of the other puppets… untethered from it… every puppet she controls can become her primary vessel…]

He froze. Not too far away, the Lord of Shadows sighed and looked around subtly. The warriors of the Sword Army were all clutching the ground, and his was the only figure that remained standing in that section of the battle formation, still leaning lazily on his black odachi as his white hair fluttered in the fierce wind.

[That's pretty terrible news. How are we supposed to kill her, then? I am sure she has countless puppets squirreled away in every corner of the world.]

His thoughts turned somber. The fact that Ki Song could transfer damage to her puppets was already bad enough… however, the fact that she could not be killed until all her puppets were destroyed was much worse. Even if they somehow managed to obliterate every puppet present on the battlefield and cut down the Queen herself, she would still continue to exist somewhere else.

He started to consider the consequences of Ki Song remaining alive after the battle. If they managed to attain Supremacy, killed Anvil, and devastated her army of puppets… well, getting rid of her for good would still be possible. It would just take a lot of time and effort.

The Sword Domain would fall into Neph's hands. They would be poised to take control of most Citadels in the Song Domain, as well. Not all was lost…

His thoughts were interrupted by Cassie's voice:

[There' still… a way… to kill her.]

Sunny remained silent for a few moments.

'Her Flaw…'

As if reading his thoughts, Cassie spoke again:

[She cares… about her daughters. Ki Song can escape, but they won't be able to. We can… exploit… the weakness…]

Sunny sighed.

It made a vile, morbid kind of sense.

So… Cassie wanted to force the Queen to fight until the end to save her daughters. It was a dirty strategy, no doubt.

But it could work.

At least if Cassie was correct and Ki Song's affection for her daughters was stronger than her desire to survive.

He cautiously extended his shadow sense toward Seishan, considering her graceful figure for a moment.

[Alright. I will inform Nephis.]

The moment they would have to act was swiftly approaching. He hoped that they would win… he hoped that the others had done their part, as well.

[Something else…]

Cassie's distant voice sounded strangely reserved.

[It is about… Broken Sword. The real reason… he had to die…]

Sunny listened intently, waiting for her to continue.

When she did, time seemed to stop for a moment.

That… was definitely not what Sunny had ever expected to hear.

Reaching to him with her power, Cassie said:

[It was because… of Weaver.]

Chapter-2217: Forbidden Fruit

Sunny froze for a moment, startled by an entirely unexpected statement.

Weaver? That sinister Demon?

What could a dead daemon have to do with Broken Sword's murder?

As the bone plain groaned and quaked under the calamitous onslaught of Supreme power, he lingered for a moment, then asked incredulously:

[What the hell do you mean, because of Weaver?]

Cassie responded a few heartbeats later, her voice sounding louder — the Queen, it seemed, was growing more distracted, allowing the blind seer to express her powers better.

[Broken Sword was… inconsolable… after Smile of Heaven perished. He convinced himself that she was still alive, lost somewhere in a Nightmare. He grew obsessed with challenging the Seed that had spawned the Category Five Gate in America, and to do that, he had to accumulate power… great power… as much power as he could.]

Sunny frowned, digesting what he heard. The truth of Broken Sword's later years was startling enough…

But what did Weaver have to do with any of it?

Cassie paused for a moment, then added:

[The members of his cohort… were all special. Smile of Heaven, Anvil, Ki Song, Asterion — they all possessed a divine lineage. But he did not. So, he ventured to do what Ki Song had done and find a Lineage Memory of his own. The only lineage that was still

unclaimed — the lineage of Shadow God.]

Sunny stirred in Rain's shadow. Far away, the Lord of Shadows tilted his head a little. Even Master Sunless blinked a few times, allowing surprise to show itself on his face.

[...Shadow God's lineage?]

Cassie's voice resounded in his head a moment later:

[Yes. He searched far and wide… but… he failed to discover the traces of Shadow. Instead, he found something else. A piece of a forbidden lineage left behind in secret by one of the daemons. Something that should not even exist, but apparently does… or did back then, at least. Broken Sword claimed that lineage, inheriting some part of Weaver, the Demon of Fate.]

Sunny forgot to breathe.

'W—what?'

If he had been stunned before, he felt shocked now. It was as if someone had struck him in the head.

'Broken Sword… found… one of the Weaves?'

And Cassie had waited so long to tell him?!

'Wait…'

Cassie's Dormant Ability only saw Sunny as a void. She could not remember anything she had known about him in the past, either… so, she probably did not even know that Sunny himself had Weaver's blood running in his veins.

No one did.

Cassie wouldn't have known the importance of that knowledge.

'Wait, Broken Sword had a part of Weaver's lineage?!'

Feeling rattled and confused, Sunny took a deep breath.

[...Weaver's lineage, I see. Why is that important?]

Cassie remained silent for a few moments, then answered quietly:

[I am not entirely sure, but it was the fact that he had come to possess the forbidden lineage that convinced Anvil, Asterion, and Ki Song to betray him. There were plenty of other reasons, too… but this one was the decisive one, as well as the one that seemed to have forced their hand. For some reason, those of divine lineages could not tolerate Broken Sword's existence after he became Weaver's heir. And so, they killed him.]

Sunny shivered.

This was… a disconcerting piece of news to learn.

Wasn't he much more of an heir to Weaver than Broken Sword had been? He had not one, but three parts of Weaver's lineage by now.

Would those who had inherited the lineage of the gods target him for some unknown reason one day, as well?

Sunny inhaled deeply.

Suddenly, he was overcome by an ominous feeling…

It was not a premonition, exactly, since his intuition had lost its mystical edge when his connection to fate was severed. However, Sunny had enough experience and knowledge by now to develop a sixth sense of his own.

Learning that the Sovereigns had turned on Broken Sword because of Weaver's lineage was definitely sounding alarms in his head.

'Damn great.'

Sunny wanted to ask another question, but at that moment, a deafening crack washed over the Song Army… and the Sword Army, as well.

The ground shuddered once more, this time more violently than it had ever done before. Rain finally lost her balance and fell, hitting

the ground with a startled yelp. On the opposite side of the battlefield, the Lord of Shadows grunted and swayed, finally straightening and raising his odachi to put it on his shoulder.

The soldiers around him were all on the ground, looking around in dazed confusion. Slowly, their features were twisted by fear.

His cold voice escaped from behind Weaver's Mask, full of aloof indifference:

"...Don't fret. There's nothing to worry about."

In front of the two cowering armies…

The harrowing battle between the two Sovereigns had entered a new, utterly inconceivable stage. The forces unleashed by their confrontation were so dire that the breastbone of the dead god itself was struggling to withstand them. New cracks formed on the surface of the bone plain, and the cracks that had been there before deepened.

And then, after an especially calamitous blow, the cracks began to widen and grow uncontrollably, as if a point of no return had been passed. The initial noise of the battlefield breaking had been drowned out by the thunderous roar of the impact, but now, everyone could both hear and sense the ground below them shifting.

The crack that was near the Seventh Royal Legion extended in an instant, cutting all the way to the edge of the Breastbone Reach. It widened, too, and a few unfortunate soldiers plummeted down….

Into the darkness.

'Damnation.'

Most people could not feel it, but Sunny could. His shadow sense extended far and wide, as well as penetrating deep.

More importantly, he had an aerial view of the battlefield from the Ivory Island. Therefore, he could see the spider web of deep cracks spreading across the entire plain.

Stretching all the way down to the Hollows.

As Rain rolled and rose to one knee, looking at the dark fissure of the jagged crack…

She saw a thick, scarlet vine rise from the darkness and attach itself to the splintered bone.

Chapter-2218: Deep Grey Sky

The calamitous battle between the two Supremes had stunned the two great armies gathered on the surface of the dead god's breastbone. The soldiers were stunned, the soldiers were awed, the soldiers were terrified…

However, they weren't the only ones affected by the cataclysmic tyranny of the deific confrontation.

Deep below them, in the dim twilight of the Hollows, the ancient jungle was in turmoil as well. The Nightmare Creatures dwelling in the darkness stirred, disturbed by the inconceivable fury of the clash between the two Sovereigns. The aftershocks of the battle had reached even the Hollows, sending the abominations into a frenzy. The jungle itself seemed to have come alive, as if sensing a threat.

...Or a feast, perhaps.

Knowing that he would have to face the Sovereigns himself, Sunny had been watching them fight intently. However, his shadow sense reached far and wide — he paid attention to what was happening in the Hollows, as well.

So, he was quite possibly the only person on the bone plain who knew what was happening in the Hollows at the moment.

That was the reason he was one of the first to understand what the Sovereigns had done.

'Crazy bastards…'

The King and the Queen actually managed to break the bone plain. Perhaps he should not have been surprised, knowing that Anvil had already cut a fissure in the dome of the Hollows once… but back then, during the fight against Condemnation, it had been the result of

a conscious action that demanded a great amount of effort, preparation, and a grand act of sorcery.

This time, the dead god's bone was broken simply from the strain of serving as a battlefield for the two murderous Supremes.

And the damage wasn't contained to a minor fissure, either — instead, a net of countless cracks snaked across the northern end of the titanic breastbone, making it look like shattered glass.

And all these cracks led to the Hollows, which boiled with frenzied activity.

The ancient jungle of Godgrave had been starved of sunlight as of late. The human armies had banished it beneath the surface and kept burning the crawling vines, thus breaking the cycle that allowed the abominable ecosystem of the Hollows to thrive.

Without the scarlet infestation spreading to the surface, the ancient jungle was denied the nutrients it needed to sustain itself — the consequences were not showing, yet, but they would turn grave before too long. The jungle starved, and therefore, the dreadful abominations dwelling under its canopy were starving as well.

That was why the jungle, and the abominations too, rushed to the surface when countless cracks split the dome of the Hollows open.

'Damn it.'

"Get up! Prepare for battle!"

Sunny's hiss sent Rain scrambling to get up. All around her, the warriors of the Seventh Royal Legion were trying to stand despite the quaking ground too. Seishan's voice broke through the cacophony of the apocalyptic battle:

"...formation! Face the cracks! …fire!"

But it was already too late.

The single vine that had extended from the crack a few moments ago had already turned into a hundred. All across the length of the jagged

fissure, the tendrils of the ancient jungle were crawling out of darkness, attaching themselves to the sun-bleached surface of the bone.

And there were more than one fissure around.

The tide of scarlet infestation really looked like frothing blood that swelled and spilled out of deep cuts, flowing endlessly…

Of course, the vines were merely a herald of what was about to come — great bridges that the jungle had risen to connect the depths of Hollows to the sunlit surface.

A moment later, a hideous head rose above the edge of the nearest fissure, and a Great Beast pushed its massive body onto the bone plain.

Rain stared at it with wide eyes, terrified, then drew her bow with a trembling hand.

…Of course, her arrow bounced off the dark hide of the monstrous creature without leaving even a scratch on it.

Things were even worse in the formation of the Sword Army.

Their enemy was located closer to the edge of the titanic breastbone, which meant that the Hollows were quite shallow there — after all, the subterranean hell did not extend to the very wall of the dead god's sternum. In fact, the position of the Song Army was only partially above the Hollows, the rest of it standing on nothing but solid bone.

The Sword Army was not as lucky. Since it was positioned further south, there was nothing by the dark expanse of the abominable jungle below the warriors of the Sword Domain. Therefore, they were going to face more horrors… they would also be surrounded from all sides, while the warriors of Song would be safe from rear attacks, at least.

Not that it mattered. Neither side was going to escape the onslaught of the scarlet tide unscathed — if they could escape it at all.

'What do I do?'

As the Lord of Shadows, Sunny was in the thick of it. He could rush to help the soldiers, slaying as many Nightmare Creatures as he could…

But he also had to wait for the perfect moment to attack the Sovereigns. If he was too late, one of them would kill the other and grow infinitely more powerful… if he did not wait long enough, neither of the Supremes would have exhausted their strength, and fighting both of them would be suicidal.

He could not allow himself to get distracted.

Seeing a train-sized centipede crawl out of a deep crack and loom over a dozen Awakened soldiers, the entire length of its underbelly opening to reveal one ghastly, endless maw, Sunny cursed and dove into the shadows.

Emerging from them a split second later, he lashed out with his odachi. The thick red carapace of the centipede was cut cleanly, and the upper third of its monumental body was severed from the rest of the monstrous creature.

The severed third fell to the ground with a deafening boom… and twisted, already scurrying to swallow its first victim.

The lower two-thirds continued to emerge from the crack, seemingly unconcerned with losing the entire upper portion.

Sunny wasted a split second to stare at the abomination, appalled.

All around him, more Nightmare Creatures than he could count were climbing to the surface, many, if not most, no less dreadful than the giant centipede.

His gaze turned even darker than it had been before.

A drop of blood fell from the blade of the odachi and broke against the weathered bone.

'Curse it all…'

Chapter-2219: Shattered Earth, Breaking Sky

Hell had descended upon Godgrave.

A storm of rustling swords blotted out the sky, unleashing a devastating rain of slaying steel upon the sea of living corpses that flooded the blood-soaked reaches of the shattered bone plain. Grotesque figures of towering Titans were straining to break the chains of sorcery that bound them, the ground quaked like a wounded beast convulsing in the throes of death, and a violent litany of deafening noises seemed to shake the very foundation of the world.

Two demigods continued their mortal battle high above the fractured battlefield, observed in silence by the distant, evil omen of the dead god's skull.

Far below, on the broken ground, a scarlet flood was flowing from the black cracks like bloody foam. The ancient jungle was rising from the dim twilight of the Hollows, starved for light and warmth — with it, countless harrowing abominations crawled to the surface, driven into a dreadful frenzy by the fury of the great battle and the tantalizing scent of human souls.

Even Sunny, who had seen a hell or two throughout his life, felt somewhat shaken by the scope and scale of the disastrous calamity, as well as by its astonishing nature…

He could not even imagine what the ordinary soldiers felt.

The two human armies were on the verge of being consumed by the dreadful tide of Nightmare Creatures. However, the veterans of the Great War were a tough tribe — they had not lost their minds to fear, even in the middle of a seemingly apocalyptic disaster.

The Saints had regained their composure first, moving to intercept the most dangerous of the emerging abominations while barking orders at the paralyzed Masters. The Masters followed the orders — mechanically at first, as if simply out of habit, then with a growing sense of purposeful determination. They rallied the Awakened soldiers and joined them in defending against the chilling flood of Nightmare Creatures.

Despite that…

The death toll was heavy in those first few moments. Then, as the two armies rose to face the liberated jungle, it lessened somewhat — but it was still of no use.

Sunny, whose incarnations allowed him a perfect view of what was happening on both sides of the battlefield, could see it clearly. One incarnation was among the soldiers of the Sword Army, one was among the soldiers of Song, and one was watching it all from a great height.

There were too many cracks, and the Nightmare Creatures crawling out of them were too powerful. These weren't the surface dwellers whom the soldiers of the two great armies had faced before, during the conquest of the Collarbone Plain, the Breastbone Reach, and the ribs of the dead god — and who had already been nearly too dreadful for Awakened to fight.

Instead, they were the ancient horrors of the Hollows, the great and dreadful predators who had spent countless years hunting others of their ghastly kind in the eternal twilight of the scarlet jungle. Many of them were of the Great Rank, and therefore almost entirely impervious to the attacks of the Awakened soldiers. Only the Saints could face them… but there were not enough Saints around.

Even worse, neither of the two armies had managed to maintain their formation. The cracks had appeared too suddenly, and they cut the battle lines, breaking them. Instead of presenting a united front against the tide of powerful abominations, the soldiers were now fighting desperately in whatever formations they could assemble, surrounded from all sides by the flood of monsters.

The situation seemed bleak. Despite the daunting scale of the battle and the immensity of the two great armies, the struggling clusters of human soldiers were like islands doomed to drown in the rising sea of scarlet darkness. They were resisting for now, but the writing was on the wall.

If nothing changed, both armies would be consumed, disappearing without a trace.

The Song Army was faring a little better, at least — its position was closer to the edge of the dead god's breastbone, so there were very few Nightmare Creatures attacking the soldiers of Song from the rear. Seishan had realized that fact, it seemed, and was now struggling to get her army to retreat further north.

The Sword Army, however, was in dire straits.

Sunny had summoned Saint and Fiend, sending them to help the soldiers. After hesitating for a few moments, he manifested two more avatars of himself, so that three incarnations of the Lord of Shadows could enter battle. All of them descended upon the Nightmare Creatures, holding the scarlet tide back.

He had to be wary of wasting essence before confronting Sovereigns, but with Serpent in his hands and countless abominations around, replenishing it by killing them would not be a problem.

Sunny and his Shadows were like heralds of death, each a devastating presence on the battlefield — but even his presence was woefully insufficient to break the tide. It was like a drop on the ocean, at least for as long as he was still holding back.

Some distance away, Nephis was like a beacon of hope in the sea of hungry darkness. The core of the Sword Army rallied around her, the soldiers being healed by her flames while her sword reaped the lives of the most powerful Nightmare Creatures.

However, she was in the same situation as Sunny.

One of his shadows was still hiding in her own.

Using the moment, he spoke to her and relayed the information

shared by Cassie as quickly as he could. Then, Sunny fell silent for a moment, waiting for her to finish off a hideous abomination that resembled a rotten, walking tree with a trunk littered by countless jagged maws… or perhaps a dead beast whose body had become the host of a tree-like parasite.

The white flames engulfed the ghastly creature, turning the scarlet leaves to ash, and the incandescent sword — the Kinslayer — cut the trunk in half.

There were already two equally horrid Nightmare Creatures rushing at Nephis through the flames a moment later.

He spoke:

"We won't last long here."

She looked around the battlefield, then nodded briefly.

"...We must advance."

Sunny lingered for a moment, then chuckled darkly.

"Advance? Advance where?!"

Nephis lunged at the two abominations, brandishing her Supreme sword.

"Across the battlefield, toward the edge of the plain. To reach the Song Army, or at least get on solid bone!"

He regarded the carnage of the calamitous battlefield from the edge of the Ivory Island, remained silent for a moment, and took a deep breath.

"That is... a crazy idea!"

Sunny rose from Neph's shadow, manifesting one more avatar.

Crushing the second abomination's skull with a monstrous blow of his armored fist, he glanced at Nephis and grinned beneath the visor of his onyx helmet.

"It might just work!"

Chapter-2220: Infernal Trailblazer

Sunny smiled… but his smile was quite forced. He could not bring himself to feel the desperate kind of glee that often overwhelmed him when in situations that seemed too bleak to cope with.

Luckily, his face was hidden behind the visor of the Mantle's helmet, so Nephis did not see his hesitation. To her, the Lord of Shadows looked as he always did — cold, confident, and full of aloof arrogance.

It was such a misplaced impulse, to look good in front of her even in the middle of a literal hell descending, and yet Sunny could not help but want to.

Reaching into the shadows, he pulled a black spear out of them, and then looked back to Nephis.

"I'll carve the path for the army to follow."

As the words left his mouth, the shadows stirred…

Then, a dreadful figure rose from them, making the soldiers shudder and flinch away.

The vast shadow took the form of a tenebrous steed with wolf-like fangs and two sharp horns, its eyes burning with terrifying crimson flames. The stallion seemed to be wreathed in a ghostly, indistinct haze of moving shadows, as if surrounded by a swarm of living nightmares, his sable coat seemingly absorbing light.

Just looking at the towering destrier filled the hearts of the soldiers with a cold feeling of dread… which was quite a feat, really, considering how terrified they had been already.

The soldiers flinched away, but Sunny took a step toward the nightmarish steed instead. Patting him on the powerful side, he said:

"Hey there, buddy. I really missed having you around."

Nightmare turned the chilling gaze of his crimson eye toward Sunny, lingered for a few moments, then snorted quietly.

Sunny smiled.

"Hey, I've been working hard too, you know!"

With that, he jumped into the saddle, lowered his spear a little, and looked at Nephis from above.

"...You'd better follow soon."

She nodded, already giving orders to the nearby officers.

Nightmare rushed forward.

The dreadful dark destrier moved with the speed of lightning, his adamantine hooves striking sparks from the ancient bone. He rushed through the ranks of the soldiers like a wave of darkness, then soared high into the air, breaching hundreds of meters in a single leap.

A few moments later, the tenebrous steed landed nimbly outside the crumbling formation, in the middle of the mass of abominations. Bones broke beneath his hooves, and flesh was torn by his steel fangs.

Splatters of blood flew in all directions, and Nightmare Creatures, who were not supposed to know fear, suddenly cowered in terror.

No matter how dreadful and deadly the black stallion was, however, his rider was like the devil himself. His fearsome onyx armor glistened dimly, and the plume of his helmet fluttered in the wind — his dark spear moved with terrible speed, piercing bodies and severing limbs. Mangled corpses fell to the ground.

For a brief moment, it seemed as if the destrier and his rider would be swallowed by the tide of abominations, but instead, the tide of abominations was broken by their furious assault. The shadows

stirred around them, widening the gap, and the Lord of Shadows rode forth, leaving a trail of death and devastation in his wake.

Behind him, the Sword Army slowly started to advance.

***

'This is… useless…'

Rain staggered back, pulled by Fleur. A moment later, a hideous claw tore at the ground where she had been standing a moment ago, leaving deep grooves in the bone that had seemed indestructible before.

The titanic skeleton had been a symbol of mystical fear for the soldiers of the Song Army, and although few truly believed that it had belonged to an actual god once, many came to regard it with the same reverence. However, today, Godgrave had proven to be far more fragile than they believed it to be.

The entire bone plain had been fractured by the King and the Queen, and now, Nightmare Creatures powerful enough to leave marks on its surface were besieging the Song Army.

Needless to say, Awakened soldiers were like ants in front of these harrowing abominations.

They had always been weaker than the native inhabitants of Godgrave, and so, the Song Army developed various ways of dealing with stronger opponents. Rain's own arsenal was largely aimed at debilitating the enemy through various means… and yet, today, her arrows were proving to be completely inefficient.

'What a blessing.'

She did not even have to worry about her Flaw, because there was no chance in hell that she would be able to kill anything.

Even though Rain did not want to admit it, she felt despair settle in her heart.

"Rani! S—snap out of it!"

Fleur pulled her back, and Tamar advanced, desperately trying to slow down the attacking horror. Her zweihander plummeted down, striking the abomination… and bouncing off uselessly. The Legacy girl staggered from the recoil of the powerful blow, and Rain's eyes widened when dreadful claws shot toward her body.

A split second later, one of the Blood Sisters landed on the Nightmare Creature's back, piercing its neck with a wavy dagger. Something flashed, and Tamar was tossed back — there was a deep gash on her side, but she was alive.

All around them, the Song Army was slowly buckling under the tide of monsters. The Nightmare Creatures were already impossible to overcome, but there was also the scarlet infestation itself they had to contend against. A mass of vines, moss, and grass spilled from the deep cracks in the ancient bone, crawling across its surface like a plague.

The jungle brought all kinds of deadly perils with it.

"Damn… damn it…"

Rain had no name for the emotion she felt, but could sense something boiling deep within her soul regardless.

Just then, Ray appeared out of nowhere, grabbed Tamar, and helped her stand up. The four of them did not even receive a momentary respite before another abomination lunged at them, its maw opening wide enough to swallow the entire cohort whole.

This time, there was no escape.

Before they were consumed, however…

Rain's shadows suddenly moved and rose from the ground. A dark blade flashed in the air, and the lunging monstrosity was cleanly cut in half.

She let out a relieved sigh. Sunny was here…

'Wait.'

Did he just openly climb out of her shadow?

Rain... did not know whether to be glad or horrified.

Obviously, she was happy that he was with her. But if her brother had decided to reveal himself… then the situation was truly desperate.

He was also wearing a fearsome onyx armor and a closed helmet, emanating a cold and unfamiliar presence.

Turning his head slightly, her brother — the Lord of Shadows — brushed across the members of her cohort with an indifferent gaze. His cold voice seemed devoid of all emotions:

"Huh… you three again. Haven't we met before?"

Tamar, Ray, and Fleur stared at him in stunned silence for a moment.

They would have stared more if not for the fact that the first row of the Seventh Legion was on the verge of collapsing under the onslaught of Nightmare Creatures.

Then, however, something strange happened.

The pressure on the fighters seemed to lessen slightly, and a new abomination emerged from the mass of monsters — this one even more dreadful than the rest.

It was a rider on a terrifying black steed, both of them drenched in blood and surrounded by a veil of moving shadows.

And behind them…

Rain's eyes widened.

'I'm seeing things, right?'

Was she mistaken, or were there vermilion banners moving behind the wall of Nightmare Creatures?

Surely, she was mistaken...

Chapter-2221: Dark Guide

The journey across the crumbling hellscape of the battlefield had been a perilous nightmare. Sunny and Nightmare cleaved into the mass of Nightmare Creatures, besieged from all sides by the frenzied avalanche of abominations. Crimson blood and scarlet sap spilled on the white bone, and mangled bodies toppled to the ground…

They were swiftly swallowed by the red sea of spreading moss, only to rise again moments later.

Even locked in a furious battle with the King of Swords, the Queen did not miss the chance to create new puppets.

Sunny opened a gap in the tide of monsters, and the Sword Army followed the dark rider. However, the horrors of the liberated jungle were not the only danger facing the soldiers — there were the army of puppets and the devastating hurricane of flying swords, as well.

He had to find a path through the cataclysmic battle of the two Domains, avoiding the wider cracks that marred the surface of the fractured plain, the flashpoint in the obliterating confrontation between Ki Song's puppet's and Anvil's swords, and the caged Titans.

Even if he did, the danger still remained — at any moment, the two Sovereigns could plummet from the sky, causing a violent detonation on the ground. If the army was caught in that violent explosion of annihilating forces, the casualties were going to be horrific… the Saints would probably survive, and some of the Masters too.

But the Awakened soldiers would become a cloud of crimson haze.

'What a mess…'

Sunny used his spear and manifested shadows to slaughter frenzied abominations. Nightmare used his fangs, his horns, and his hoofs to

furiously rip them apart. The aura of dread surrounding the black steed weakened the hungry Nightmare Creatures, which made the two of them even more deadly than they already were.

Far behind, Sunny's other incarnations were struggling to preserve the fragile formation of the advancing army side by side with other Saints of the Sword Domain. One of his avatars was protecting the rear, one was fighting on the right flank, and one was fighting on the left. Saint and Fiend were holding back the flood of Nightmare Creatures, as well…

Nephis and her miraculous flames were at the head of the army, continuously healing the soldiers and following the path that he had carved.

Somehow, unbelievably… they made it quite far.

The casualties were heavy, and the formation of the Sword Army had turned into a complete mess, all pretenses of order obliterated by the carnage of the great battle and the complicated terrain of the fractured plain. But they still managed to torturously extricate themselves from the worst of the scarlet flood and made it to the epicenter of the clash between the dead army and the storm of swords.

That was perhaps even more dangerous than being surrounded by a sea of frenzied Nightmare Creatures.

Neither the puppets nor the flying swords were hostile to the human soldiers — however, they did not seem concerned about collateral damage, either.

There were cracks leading to the Hollows here, as well, and the jungle was attempting to escape to the surface from them, too… but most of the horrors that escaped the darkness were swiftly obliterated by the violent aftershocks of the harrowing battle between the two Sovereigns.

The army was only actively besieged from the rear now — liberated from the dire need to fight the Nightmare Creatures, it closed ranks and concentrated on defense, the officers exerting their Aspect

powers to protect the Awakened soldiers from the chaos, the mayhem, the destructive shockwaves of distant collisions, and the rustling streams of stray swords.

Success... was limited, at best.

The ground was still quaking, the deafening cacophony of the battle was still unbearable, and the world still resembled a crumbling hell. In fact, now that the soldiers were not just witnessing the clash between the Supremes, but were in the midst of it, the chilling catastrophe of their clash had only become harder to conceive of, fathom, and endure.

But they did endure.

Even then, it was in no small part thanks to Sunny. He had not volunteered to become a guide for the reeling Sword Army merely because of how strong he was, and how fearsome his steed was. Rather, he was the best man for the job because his shadow sense was able to envelop the entire battlefield.

Therefore, Sunny knew where to go, what path to choose, and which directions to steer clear of in order to avoid complete annihilation.

The battered army slowly advanced through the carnage. All pretenses of maintaining an orderly formation had long been abandoned, and by now, it was nothing more than a vast mob… however, it was a mob of seasoned warriors, not panicking civilians. Faced with a horror too great to be fathomed, the soldiers had simply abandoned fear, somberly concentrating on the task at hand instead and refusing to think about anything else.

Perhaps that was why they had survived.

'I… need to hurry…'

Sunny was concerned about the Song Army, as well.

After all, Rain was there. Cassie was there, too, bound by the invisible strings of the Queen's power.

As he was carving a blood path through the mayhem atop Nightmare

and fighting to defend the splintering Sword Army, he was also tensely observing Rain. In the end, Sunny had no choice but to emerge from her shadow and reveal himself among the soldiers of Song for the first time since his sister had become one of them.

Almost at the same time, he finally broke through the tide of abominations and came in view of the battered expanse of the Queen's soldiers.

He regarded them for a moment from Nightmare's back, streams of blood running down the onyx surface of the Mantle.

The sight of him sitting atop Nightmare must have been quite terrifying.

The Song Army had done better than the warriors of the Sword Domain, but they too were on the verge of drowning in the scarlet flood. Neither of the sides were going to weather the calamity alone…

Truthfully, even if they joined forces, their chances were not great.

But wasn't it funny?

These people had been ready to kill each other not too long ago, but now, their best chance to survive was to fight side by side with each other.

'I can't tell if that is poetic or ironic…'

Perhaps it was both.

Somewhere behind, the vague silhouette of the Ivory Island revealed itself from the storm of swords, looming above the Sword Army as if trying to shield it from the fury of the Supreme battle above.

Raising his spear, Sunny leaned forward and tossed it at the soldiers of Song.

They did not even have time to react.

Tearing the air, the dark spear instantly breached the remaining

distance…

And nailed a monstrous spider that had been lunging at Seishan to the ground.

Spinning swiftly, she spent a split second to stare at the spider, then turned her head and looked at Sunny.

He met her gaze coldly, remained motionless for a moment… and then gave her an exaggerated bow.

Behind him, the banners of the Sword Army fluttered in the hurricane wind.

Chapter-2222: Friend or Foe

Sunny would have loved to say that the two great armies united in a beautiful display of human camaraderie, but in reality, nothing that grand happened.

The bone plain was still crumbling, and the jungle was still spilling from the depths of the Hollows like a scarlet tide. The situation worsened quickly, and all that remained of order — what little of it had been left by then — swiftly collapsed into mayhem and chaos.

Minutes after the Sword Army reached the buckling line of Song soldiers, both forces were overwhelmed by the flood of abominations. The ground quaked, and the cracks spread. The battle lines collapsed, the officers lost control of their units, and the two forces merged into one vast sea of desperately fighting soldiers.

It was not that the Song soldiers and the warriors of the Sword Domain, who had been enemies less than an hour ago, discarded their differences and embraced each other as comrades. It was just that no one cared about which side the people around them belonged to anymore.

There were only humans and Nightmare Creatures on the bone plain, now.

…And the demigods who continued their terrifying battle in the sky and on the ground, ravaging the fractured surface of Godgrave with their inhuman power.

If there was one reason why the soldiers still held, refusing to collapse into the endless tide of dreadful abominations, it was that the core of the human sea stood like a monolith in the path of the Nightmare Creatures and broke their terrifying momentum.

There, white radiance shone beautifully amidst the maelstrom of steel

and abominable flesh, washing over the human warriors and healing their wounds, while at the same time enveloping the grotesque figures of the powerful Nightmare Creatures and melting them like wax.

That was where Changing Star made her stand. The seasoned veterans of the two great armies rallied behind her, serving as an anchor for the mass of desperate soldiers and preventing them from drowning helplessly in the encroaching darkness.

Sunny played his part as well, of course. While Nephis made herself the axis of the sea of human warriors, he spread his avatars and Shadows along the edges of their disorganized mass. There were five incarnations of the Lord of Shadows sowing death and destruction on the fractured bone plain, now, as well as Saint, Fiend, and Nightmare.

There were also all the Saints of the two Domains, fighting side by side.

In one corner of the battlefield, Sunny couldn't help but chuckle when he found himself fighting side by side with Saint Jest — he was still determined to kill the old bastard… but that would have to wait until a later date.

In another place, he found himself rescuing none other than Beastmaster from the jaws of a Great Monster. The beautiful enchantress spared him a glance and smiled weakly.

"Well… aren't you a sight for sore eyes, Lord Shadow."

He looked at her coldly, then sneered behind the visor of his helmet.

"Sorry to say this, but you seem to only have one eye left."

Commanding her thralls to lunge at the avalanche of Nightmare Creatures, Beastmaster grinned.

Her grin looked quite terrifying, considering that the entire left side of her face was missing.

"Don't you worry… it will heal. Ah, why do they always go for my

face?"

Someplace else, Sunny saw Summer Knight making his way toward the distant radiance of Neph's flames,

He saw Dar of the Maharana clan unleashing a devastating rain of arrows on the Nightmare Creatures besieging Rivalen of Aegis Rose. He also saw Saint Helie taking on a Great Beast that threatened to devour Mercy of Clan Dagonet, Jest's grandson…

That one was both poetic and ironic as well.

But mostly, Sunny had no time to observe the raging sea of violence boiling all around him, since he was forced to concentrate on his own five avatars and the distant clash between the two Sovereigns.

…Somewhere on the battlefield, Sid the Fire Keeper cursed as she dodged the claws of an enormous abomination. The beast resembled a monstrous ape with six spindly arms, its gaunt body full of festering wounds and crawling with wriggling maggots. She used her Aspect to deliver a powerful blow to the creature, but her sword barely managed to leave a scratch on its skin.

Her shield, however, slammed into it with enough force to throw the abominable ape back.

A slender figure in a red dress was revealed on the ground behind it, struggling to rise.

Sid grabbed the woman and pulled her to her feet.

"Stand up, you fool!"

Felise looked up at her with a dazed expression, blood flowing down her beautiful face.

She spoke hoarsely:

"I can… stand… on my own…"

Sid snarled.

"Shut the hell up! And help me!"

The two faced the Nightmare Creatures, covering each other's backs. Sid brandished her sword, while Felise raised her wavy dagger.

A moment later, the abominations were upon them.

Some distance away, Saint Tyris of White Feather was facing down a Great Demon, her cold face betraying no emotion. Unable to assume her Transcendent form in the storm of deadly swords, she was forced to fight as a human.

As she lunged forward, a powerful gale pushing her sword to incredible speed, an enormous winged lion with white fur crashed into the demon, tearing into its side with sharp fangs. The Great Nightmare Creature simply shook Roan off, turning to unleash a fatal attack at his wife.

Before its jaws closed around Tyris, however…

A wave of darkness surrounded it like a whirlpool, and Revel appeared from it like a beautiful fiend. The onyx talons crowning her wings pierced the demon's throat, and she grabbed its jaws with both hands, straining her muscles to rip them apart.

A pained roar drowned the thunderous clamor of the battle, and black blood flowed down.

Not too far from the three of them, Rain and Tamar found themselves surrounded by a swarm of human-sized insects. The ant-like creatures were less indestructible than other horrors of the ancient jungle, but their sheer number was a terror to behold.

They were fighting them desperately, with Rain wounding the abominations and Tamar finishing them off. However, the monstrous ants were simply too many…

Just as Rain staggered, a bolt of lightning suddenly flashed past her, striking into the mass of vile creatures and chaining from one to another, instantly causing several of them to collapse.

Glancing back, she saw a young woman with golden hair, her armor

dented and her white cloak smeared in blood. The young woman spun, cutting down another abomination, and took a shaky step back.

The three of them found themselves standing back to back with each other.

Taking a labored breath, Rain forced out a smile.

"Hey, you… I know you, don't I?"

The Feather Knight answered without turning, her tone cold:

"...I guess."

Rain chuckled.

"How's your leg?"

As the swarms of ants recovered from the damage dealt by the lightning and rushed at them, the young woman answered with a hint of vitriol in her voice:

"How's your neck?"

Sadly, there was no time to answer…

Far away, standing on the battered surface of the Ivory Island, Sunny tilted his head to avoid a stray piece of shrapnel and looked into the sky with a grim expression.

There, a river of blood and a rustling sphere of deadly steel collided once again, tearing a hole in the storm of swords.

Down below, the Titans were slowly breaking out of their chains.

His eyes were dark.

He exhaled slowly.

'Not yet…'

Chapter-2223: Blood and Steel

High above the battlefield, the King of Swords was still being pursued by the river of crimson blood. Surrounded by the storm of swords, he retreated closer and closer to the swirling veil of radiant clouds… as if being driven into a corner.

Far below, the fractured bone plain was swelling with scarlet rot, and the dead Titans were struggling against the chains of sorcery that bound them. The shimmering runes formed by countless flying swords were already vague and distorted, on the verge of crumbling.

Finally, one of the colossal creatures broke free of its ethereal cage and stepped forward, ready to unleash its profane power.

Before it could, however…

Anvil spun in the air and slashed with one of his dreadful swords, causing the world itself to split in half.

The thin line where reality seemed to be cut extended all the way down to the surface of the shattered battlefield, passing across the gargantuan figure of the Titan. A moment later, the world healed itself, and the scar left on its fabric by the King's strike was erased.

The Titan, however, staggered and fell apart, cut cleanly in two.

The severed giant plummeted down. Its mountain-like body was so vast that a dozen seconds passed before its dreadful mass hit the ground — when it did, the entire bone plain shuddered, and the cracks marring its fractured surface grew wider.

By then, Anvil was already landing on the quaking bone. Grasping his two swords and commanding the other five to form a rustling sphere of lethal steel around him once again, he looked at the great waterfall of blood that threatened to drown him… and attacked.

This time, his attacks were eerily different in nature.

They seemed the same, but there was something uncanny about the way his swords moved now, as if he was aiming their dreadful blades at something that mortals could not even perceive, let alone fathom.

The river of blood rippled strangely and reeled back, as if hurt. All around the battlefield, hundreds of dead puppets fell to the ground lifelessly — there were no wounds on their bodies, and no blood flowing to the surface of the ancient bone. However, despite that, the corpses remained laying on it motionlessly, as if the Queen had no power over them anymore.

Lowering his swords slightly, Anvil stared at the crimson wall of blood towering above him darkly.

A cold voice resounded from beneath the visor of his black helmet:

"Why don't you get serious, now?"

A melodious laughter suddenly surrounded him, carried by the gales of hurricane wind.

"Shall I?"

As the echoes of the Queen's laughter were swallowed by the cacophony of battle, the sea of crimson blood rippled once again and receded a little. Some distance away, the colossal corpse of the slain Titan that towered above the plain like a mountain stirred suddenly, and then moved.

The flesh of the gargantuan creature began to rot with tremendous speed, soon turning into a flood of viscous crimson liquid. The revolting mass of it flowed forward and rose from the ground, surrounding the sea of blood like a shell.

Then, the process of decomposition was reversed, and it turned solid again. Soon, a terrifying flesh golem rose about the fractured plain, towering above it at hundreds meters in height… the river of blood was now contained within it, flowing through its veins and nurturing it with Supreme power.

Pieces of broken bone extended through the monstrous doll's torn skin, and a vague outline of a human face lay hidden beneath the hideous features of its face.

Anvil let out a low chuckle.

"Ah… how distasteful…"

As torrents of flying swords twisted in the air and plummeted down, aiming to tear the towering flesh golem apart, it lunged forward with speed that no creature of that size was supposed to possess.

Its two gargantuan hands rose, and then fell down like crushing hammers. Anvil's five swords rushed forward to block the harrowing strike, and the moment the fists of the Queen met them…

A flash of light drowned the battlefield for a moment, and an obliterating shockwave spread in all directions, disintegrating thousands of flying swords, turning countless puppets into bloody haze, and causing several enormous pieces of the bone plain to plummet into the depths of the Hollows.

...Observing the cataclysmic collision from the distant surface of the Ivory Island, Sunny shivered.

He did not have to turn away to look at the pitiful state of the two great armies. Nephis was still holding the core of the vast, disorganized mob of human soldiers together, while he was dealing with the worst of the nightmare tide at its edges. The Saints were still fighting, and the Awakened warriors were still enduring, as well…

But the situation was turning grimmer and grimmer with each minute.

He was barely preserving all his incarnations and keeping the truly powerful abominations away from Rain. The amount of essence he received back from slaughtering Nightmare Creatures had fallen behind the amount he was expending some time ago, and Nephis was not doing any better.

His Shadows were receiving one wound after another, too… and if even Fiend was suffering damage, then the Saints of the two Domains

would soon be on the verge of death.

In fact, a few of them had already perished.

Beastmaster's thralls were nearly eradicated. The forged Echoes of the Valor elites had all been destroyed. The casualties among the soldiers were mounting, and with every one of them that fell, there was one less warrior to stem the flood of abominations left standing.

Worse still, the jungle was escaping onto the surface of the fractured plain. Before, the humans only had to contend against the dreadful predators of the Hollows — but now, the spreading scarlet plague was threatening to swallow them, as well.

The hungry moss, the bloodthirsty grass, the poisonous thorns of slithering vines, the clouds of deadly pollen, the spores that landed on human flesh only to sprout abominable mycelia through it… the soldiers had to suffer all of it and more, all the while being torn apart and devoured by the ghastly Nightmare Creatures.

He had joked about Beastmaster's missing eye before… but really, Sunny was disturbed by the sight. If even the immensely powerful princess of Song could not protect herself in this inconceivable calamity, then what hope did the rest of them have?

Sunny's thoughts turned somber.

The plan… the plan was to wait until the Sovereigns had exhausted each other, or, better yet, had brought each other to the brink of death — he and Nephis were only supposed to attack them then.

However, Sunny was not sure that they could wait for much longer, not anymore.

Not only were the great armies in a desperate situation, but Sunny and Nephis were wasting essence — both of them possessed vast reserves of it, but those reserved would only continue to dwindle.

Then, who would be exhausted and on the brink of death by the time they entered the fray?

Looking into the distance with a grim expression, Sunny grimaced.

So, then…

When were they supposed to attack?

Only one person knew the answer.

'I need to find Cassie…'

Chapter-2224: Blood Ties

Out there on the battlefield, Cassie felt less and less like a living marionette. Ki Song still held power over her body and soul, of course, but was either too distracted to control Cassie's every move or had simply decided to allow her some measure of freedom.

At the moment, Cassie was unsure whether to feel relieved or regretful about her sudden liberation.

Her body had been controlled by the Queen entirely when the flood of Nightmare Creatures first descended upon the Song Army. It was a strange experience, to feel herself move with martial skill far greater than her own, slaying powerful abominations with the cold composure of a born killer. It was even stranger still because Cassie could only see herself with Seishan's eyes.

Her face was the same, and her body was the same. However, everything else was unfamiliar — her fierce poise, her deadly grace, the smooth fluidity of her confident movements… Cassie could both feel and see her body fight, but she had no part in making it move.

It was eerie.

The role the Queen wanted her to play, it seemed, was to protect Seishan... even at the cost of her own life. So, Cassie's body was like a bodyguard for the beautiful princess of Song, whether she liked it or not.

As the battle between Ki Song and Anvil entered a new stage, however, she could suddenly move on her own again. She also had far greater access to her Aspect again, which made up somewhat for losing the macabre guidance of the Queen.

Cassie was still not entirely free, though. There were certain things that her own body was preventing her from doing — like straying too

far from Seishan, for example, or aiming her rapier at Seishan's back.

'I wouldn't want to kill her, anyway…'

Cassie needed Seishan alive as much as the Queen wanted her to survive.

The two of them had stood in front of the Seventh Legion when the battle started. As the abominable jungle broke free from the dim darkness of the Hollows and the dreadful abominations escaped to the surface, Seishan attempted to get the Song Army to react in time — she was one of the first to realize the consequences of the bone plain fracturing, and acted accordingly.

Seishan's swift actions saved numerous lives… but not enough lives.

The battle swiftly descended into utter chaos. The Song Army was just as fractured as the battlefield was, the soldiers separated from each other by the jagged cracks and the scarlet tide rising from them. It was all but impossible to regain any significant measure of control over the formation, but Seishan and Beastmaster still tried, desperately attempting to get the army to pull back.

The precarious battle line was on the verge of collapsing when the Lord of Shadow broke through the endless horde of abominations on his monstrous steed, covered in blood and leading the ravaged Sword Army behind him.

The situation turned a bit better after that — for a short while — but also even more chaotic. All distinctions between units were discarded, and the humans simply fought side by side, not caring who was friend and who was foe.

A terrible carnage usurped the world.

The battle took Seishan and Cassie away from the core of the vast mob of human soldiers, where Nephis and the Fire Keepers held the core against the deadliest of the Nightmare Creatures.

By then, Cassie had regained enough of her powers to use her Awakened and Ascended Abilities freely. Her own performance was far below what she had been able to accomplish under the Queen's

control, but adequate enough to stay alive… just barely.

Seishan, on the contrary, was only growing stronger the more blood was spilled around them. It was unclear who was protecting whom, now — and yet, even the daughter of the Queen was not doing too well in the feverish mayhem of the calamitous battle.

Both of them were covered in blood and wounded, their armor tattered and breached. All Cassie could do was stay close to Seishan and follow her as the older woman moved through the battlefield with a strange sense of purpose, her beautiful face turning darker and more desperate with each second.

"Veil!"

Suddenly, Seishan lunged forward, discarding all pretense of caution. She tore into the mass of Nightmare Creatures, her claws tearing their hides like sharp blades. Her fangs ripped into them, as well, sending rivers of fetid blood spilling to the ground.

Each wound Seishan dealt to the abominations bled far more profusely than it should have, and the dreadful beings died far more swiftly, and far more gruesomely, than Cassie had expected.

Breaking through the mass of Nightmare Creatures, they came about a desolate section of the battlefield. Here, no human soldier had survived, and heaps of abominable bodies lay on the ground, piled high. There were some thralls of Beastmaster scattered between the dead abominations, all torn to shreds and dead.

At the center of the vast graveyard of Nightmare Creatures, a sole figure was sprawled on the ground, surrounded by a ring of emptiness.

It was a delicate woman with a slender build, both her enchanting face and her white hair painted red by blood… Moonveil, Seishan's sister.

Dismissing her monstrous form, Seishan dashed toward the motionless figure and fell to her knees near it, leaning close to press her ear against Moonveil's bloodied chest.

Cassie could hear her mumbling quietly:

"Alive… still alive…"

The battle was raging around them, and some hideous horrors could attack them at any moment. Standing above Seishan, Cassie turned and raised her weapons, ready to attack.

...Her pale lips twisted into a faint smile under the dirt and grime of the battlefield.

Maintaining a neutral tone, Cassie spoke without turning back:

"It is hard to envy the burden of your mother's love."

She had waited to speak these words for a long time.

Turning away from unconscious Moonveil for a moment, Seishan looked up with ire in her cold, piercing eyes.

Then, her gaze slid further, rising to behold the storm of swords raging in the distant sky.

A few words could cut deeper than a sword, if spoken at the right moment.

And a tiny seed of doubt could grow into a towering tree, if planted into fertile soil.

Seishan was too smart to have no doubt, but she needed a push to accept it. In these days that they spent together, Cassie had been subtly preparing to give her that push.

The daughters of Ki Song... were too loyal to their mother. The only thing they were more loyal to were each other.

These orphan girls who had been taken from the streets to be raised as indomitable warriors cherished each other more than they loved the Queen.

That was the lever Cassie had to use if she wanted to send them plummeting into the pit of betrayal. To make them choose, and

therefore save their lives when Nephis took her throne.

Seishan's eyes hardened subtly as she watched her mother clash against the King of Swords in the distance as her sister bled in her arms.

Looking away, she started to summon a Memory and gritted her teeth.

"...Shut up."

Cassie smiled and obeyed her command.

After all, she had already said what she wanted to say.

And Seishan had already made a choice, even if she did not realize it yet.

'I hope Moonveil survives.'

But if she didn't, the lesson would only sink deeper.

Cassie sighed.

At that moment, she was distracted by a dark figure that appeared some distance away, and a voice that resounded in her head.

[Cassie… I need to know about the others. Have your powers returned?]

She took a deep breath.

Her powers had returned, indeed.

Chapter-2225: Broken Covenant

The shattered moon shone upon the ruined castle.

The cold winds howled as they passed through the ruins, slamming into piles of rubble with vengeful power. An especially strong gust sent a small pebble falling from a broken wall into a pan of bubbling stew.

Morgan ignored the pebble. She ignored Nightingale, who landed nearby, as well.

Instead, she looked up and let out a long sigh.

'Loyalty…'

Loyalty was a funny thing. It came in many forms and many shapes, from different sources. Loyalty had a power in and of itself — a great power, sometimes — but in the realm of Supremes, it also possessed a mystical authority.

It was a covenant between a ruler and the people. It was the lifeblood of a Domain, as well as the means through which Domains spread. To be precise, for those Supremes who built their Domains with the help of the Nightmare Spell, it was the loyalty of Saints that mattered most.

Because their kingdoms were built from Citadels, and most people — even those of the Supreme Rank — could only control one Citadel at a time. There were exceptions, of course, like her monstrous brother, but those exceptions only served to prove the rule.

So, Saints became proxies for the Supremes, controlling Citadels in their name. To do so, they had to pledge their fealty to a Sovereign… and swear loyalty to a Domain.

But loyalty was not an event. It was a process.

Therefore, even if a Saint swore an oath of fealty, their loyalty was not carved in stone. It could grow more powerful or weaken — it could even become entirely exhausted, dissolving like a mirage. If that happened, the Sovereign would lose a vassal, and the Domain would lose a Citadel.

But it was not easy, to exhaust someone's loyalty.

Because loyalty came in many forms.

There was personal loyalty to a Sovereign, like what Sir Gilead and other retainers of the Great Clan Valor felt. There was also a more abstract kind of loyalty like that of vassal Saints, who were not necessarily devoted to their Sovereign, but were instead devoted to the Domain itself — because their families, clans, friends, and comrades were a part of it.

And many more.

That was why a vassal Saint could despise a Sovereign, but still be part of the Sovereign's Domain. Domains were vast things, after all, and encompassed much more than solely their rulers.

Which was why it was so ironic…

That Morgan, the daughter of a Sovereign, had no loyalty left.

It was because to her, the Sword Domain was precisely that — it was solely a representation of her father. She was raised to be a ruler, and for that reason, her connection to the vast complexity of the Domain was different from that of everyone else.

It was far more simple, and therefore, far more easily destroyed.

Morgan did not have friends or comrades, she only had subordinates… who were mere tools. Her clan and her family were a single person — the King of Swords.

And so, once she lost all faith in her father, she lost the connection to the Sword Domain as well.

Perhaps she was simply selfish, not caring about anyone or anything else.

'It can't be… I am Morgan of Valor. I am the princess of the Sword Domain.'

But it could.

Morgan smiled crookedly.

Her brother… had her beat.

The bastard…

A forlorn chuckle escaped her lips.

"Lady Morgan? Are you alright?"

She turned her head, noticing Nightingale looking at her with concern. The others seemed wary, too.

Right… there were her six Transcendent blades, as well.

What the hell was she supposed to do?

Morgan forced out a smile.

"I am perfectly fine."

But she wasn't.

She… was supposed to defend Bastion from Mordret. To prevent it from falling into his hands, and therefore becoming lost to her father, empowering Ki Song instead.

Today was the day of the full moon — one that had repeated countless times — which meant that even those who did not control the Great Citadel would be able to travel between its true and illusory versions in a few hours. All her brother had to do to conquer Bastion was cross over to the other side, enter the illusory version of the ancient castle, and tether his soul to its Gateway, thus overwriting her own imprint.

But it was all meaningless, now. Bastion was already lost to the King of Swords. Her brother would without a doubt still want to conquer it for the Queen of Worms — and for himself, as well — however, did Morgan still want to defend it?

Perhaps she did. Not for the Sword Domain, but for herself.

...But even if she did, was there a reason to make these people die for it?

Morgan studied her Saints.

Soul Reaper, Raised By Wolves, Nightingale, Naeve, Bloodwave, Aether…

She had conscripted them into this war, and watched them die countless times. To be honest, Morgan was a little sick of it.

'How... strange.'

She was not a part of the Sword Domain anymore, but she had never been anything else. Morgan's entire sense of self was tied to the Great Clan Valor, and therefore, all her actions had always been for the benefit of the clan.

Now that she had turned her back on that, there was no structure to the world, and nothing for her to lean on.

It had been reasonable and a matter of course to sacrifice these people for the Sword Domain, if need be, before. But what about now?

There was no reason to force them to their deaths whatsoever.

Apart from Morgan's own selfish desire to defeat her brother, of course.

Was she despicable enough to condemn her subordinates to death for a purely selfish reason?

'Yes. Yes, I am.'

But she was not pathetic enough to do so.

Morgan had nothing else left, but she still had her pride.

She did not have to deceive anyone into fighting her brother for her. If she were to defeat him, she was going to defeat him herself.

Granted, chances were that she would just die a graceless death instead.

That was a matter of course, as well.

Morgan took a deep breath, and then smiled at her Saints.

"The battle is over. We lost. You can all leave now… if you wish."

Chapter-2226: Pebble Stew

The six Saints stared at her in confusion. The expressions of the Night Saints were, quite predictably, subtly different from those of the government Saints — who seemed to have learned about the loop recently.

Morgan observed their reactions with morbid curiosity.

Eventually, it was Naeve who broke the silence:

"The battle… is over? What do you mean?"

Morgan fished the damn pebble out of the stew and shrugged.

"You probably don't remember, but I borrowed a very special Supreme Memory from Soul Reaper a while back. That Memory, in combination with my Aspect, allowed me to force the same day to repeat itself over and over again. This day, to be precise. The seven of us have battled my brother countless times today, and we have lost countless times. Each of you died a variety of gruesome deaths… if I recall correctly, you were beheaded the last time, Saint Naeve."

'Good thing I came to my senses in time. The stew was about to be burnt…'

She removed the pan from the fire and looked at the six Saints.

"But it's meaningless now. I won't borrow the Supreme Memory again, and I won't turn the time back again. Today will be the last time I battle my brother in these ruins. So… if you die this time, you'll remain dead forever. Therefore, I am giving you a chance to leave. No strings attached."

They stared at her in stunned silence.

For a while…

Then, Naeve gritted his teeth.

"We came here… to avenge the slain members of our clan… to stand against this monster!"

His voice was full of powerless fury and indignation.

Morgan looked at him coldly.

"You failed."

She sighed, then went about scooping the stew into their bowls.

"Vengeance is a noble goal, Saint Naeve, and I would never advocate something as tasteless as forgiveness. However, there is some wisdom to what people say — before you embark on a journey of revenge, you should dig two graves… one for your enemy, and one for yourself. Fools tend to believe that this saying admonishes revenge as a path to self-destruction, but I disagree. I rather see it as a warning that those seeking revenge must be prepared to die if they want to succeed."

Morgan handed Naeve a bowl of steaming stew and looked him in the eye.

"So, are you prepared to die? I think you are… I know you are, since I saw you die a hundred times. However, don't you have a family out there in the waking world? What will happen to your daughter if you die? What will happen to the survivors of the House of Night if all three of you die? Shouldn't you concentrate on protecting the precious things you have left instead of avenging the things you lost?"

She did not really care about whether Naeve lived or died that much. But… his daughter was cute. So, Morgan did not want to see the little girl lose her father on her account.

The Saint of Night looked at her with dark intensity.

"...You did not seem to care about that when you made us your cannon fodder, Lady Morgan."

She smiled.

"That was because I believed I had a better cannon back then. But things have changed."

Morgan sighed.

"Go, return to the waking world and forget about my brother. The remains of your clan are with the government now — they'll need Saints to guide them across the oceans. The House of Night may cease to exist, but you might rebuild it as well. The decision is yours."

She turned her gaze to the government Saints.

"And it was a pleasure to fight side by side with the three of you. Really, it was quite spectacular — not that I had expected anything less from my sister's companions. But everything good must come to an end. The government will be in a precarious situation once the war ends, since it won't be needed anymore… since Earth won't be needed anymore. The winner won't care about the waking world. So, the waking world will need you."

They glanced at each other, something strange revealing itself in their eyes for a moment.

Morgan ignored their strange gazes and summoned a beautifully crafted, flawlessly clean spoon into her hand.

Picking up her own bowl, she said:

"Eat. The food is getting cold."

The six Saints looked at her somberly, then at each other. Eventually, though, they picked up their bowls as well…

No one else had a set of Memory utensils, of course, and the ones they used were quite appalling.

The meal passed in dead silence.

Morgan suspected that this would be the last time they shared food, which made her feel a little wistful.

But only a little.

After the meal was finished, she went away to give them some time to discuss things among themselves — not too much time, though, since her brother would undoubtedly attack soon.

By the time she returned, the decision seemed to have been made.

Naeve, Bloodwave, and Aether looked at her silently for a while.

Eventually, the youngest — Aether — gave her a small bow.

"Lady Morgan. We will be departing."

She smiled at him faintly.

"Better not waste any time, then."

He hesitated for a few moments before nodding stiffly.

"I... I hope we will meet again, one day."

'The bastard. You should not have rejected me if you were going to act sentimental.'

With that, the three Saints of the House of Night left. They returned to the waking world, disappearing from the moonlit ruins without a trace.

The emptiness they left behind felt larger than Morgan had anticipated.

She lingered for a bit, then shifted her gaze to the three government Saints.

It was a bit surprising that they were still here.

Morgan raised an eyebrow.

"Not leaving?"

They remained silent for a while.

Soul Reaper Jet was leaning on the crumbling wall, looking at the fire lazily. Raised by Wolves was sitting on a piece of rubble, tossing her famous Memory — the Black Beast Locket — into the air and catching it again absentmindedly, a strangely somber expression on her usually lively face. Nightingale was studying Morgan, as if searching for something.

Eventually, it was Raised by Wolves who broke the silence:

"My family home is in Bastion, you know."

Morgan gave her a curious glance.

"But your family is safe and sound in NQSC. Does it really matter?"

She smiled darkly and did not respond.

Instead, Nightingale asked, his voice as pleasant as always:

"Lady Morgan… the war is about to end, is it not? One way or another."

She looked at his obnoxiously handsome face and shrugged.

"The final battle should be happening any day now… it might even be raging as we speak."

He hesitated for a few moments, then asked:

"Why are you giving up, then?"

Morgan smiled bitterly.

What did he know? That fool…

"I have not given up. It's just that… I already lost."

In the next moment, though, her smile turned cold and sharp.

"That is no reason to surrender, however. No matter what happens, I intend to defend Bastion until I die."

'Or until my brother dies… that would be much better.'

Nightingale looked at her with a hint of sadness in his eyes.

His voice was like honey...

"I'd prefer it if you didn't."

Morgan gave him a strange look.

She lingered for a few moments, then shook her head in bewilderment.

"What do I care about your preferences?"

Nightingale remained silent for a while, then looked up and let out a heavy sigh.

"No, you don't understand… I'm afraid I must insist."

Morgan frowned.

'What does he…'

Before she could finish the thought, however, Nightingale looked at her and said, a strange firmness finding its way into his beautiful voice:

"I am truly sorry, Lady Morgan. But… please don't move."

And as he spoke, an eerie power suddenly constrained Morgan, crushing her like a vise and paralyzing her body.

Obeying his command, she froze.

Chapter-2227: The Dragon and the Princess

Nightingale told her to cease movement, and so, Morgan found herself unable to move.

It was as if her body had turned into an ice sculpture. She could still breathe, but nothing more than that… his clear voice had easily crushed her defenses, seeped past the barriers erected by her potent Memories, and caught her completely by surprise.

'Such power…'

Morgan attempted to disobey the overwhelming finality of his command, desperately struggling against her own body. But it was of no use.

She was completely and utterly at his mercy.

'Ha… ha-ha…'

Vulnerable as she was, Morgan mostly felt amused. There was more than a fair bit of indignant disbelief in her heart, as well, but no fear — not only because she was not a person who felt fear easily, but also because she found herself not caring that much about what would happen to her.

Still…

Sure, she had failed to remain vigilant at all times, turning a blind eye to the potential threat presented by her supposed comrades. Perhaps it was because she had stayed with them for so long, and had experienced so much, but Morgan allowed herself to lower her guard around them — forgetting that for these three, most of the time they had shared amounted to merely a single day.

She had also been conserving essence in preparation for the final battle against her brother, and so, the more powerful of her defensive Memories were not even active.

And… she was exhausted…

However, the fact still remained. It was too easy to forget sometimes because of how nice he seemed, but Nightingale… he was a terrifying man, that slayer of dragons. Or rather, he had the potential to be terrifying, simply choosing not to abuse his dreadful power.

'But what is he trying to do?'

Morgan doubted that Nightingale would have struck a deal with her brother. So was it some misguided scheme to save her life against her will? To whisk her away to safety, whether she wanted to or not? Knowing the man… no, even for him, it would have been too ridiculous and infantile.

She was not sure, and infuriatingly enough, she could not even ask. All she could do was stare at the charming bastard with cold fury burning in her eyes.

Nightingale met her sharp gaze without looking away, a hint of regret apparent in his firm gaze. A few moments later, he sighed and turned to his companions.

"I won't be able to hold her for long. But it should be long enough."

Raised by Wolves scoffed and caught her black locket one last time, rising from the piece of rubble. Soul Reaper pushed herself off the wall and came closer, studying Morgan lazily.

Morgan felt a chill run down her spine under that relaxed gaze.

Jet clicked her tongue and glanced at Nightingale.

"That's great, but what are we supposed to do with her? Simply killing her is not an option... I presume. Even though, gods know, she deserved to die for all the vile crap she and her clan are guilty of."

Morgan stared at her with dark amusement, undisturbed by the

threat of being killed and the stark accusation both.

'Not a rescue, then…'

They wouldn't be considering disposing of her if it was. So what the hell were they planning?

Nightingale shook his head.

"We are not killing her."

Soul Reaper sighed with regret.

"What, then?"

He hesitated for a few moments, then shrugged.

"I'll just take her with me. It will… probably be alright."

Jet looked at him with a dubious frown.

At that moment, Raised by Wolves spoke in a subdued tone:

"Whatever. If Kai says that it will be alright, then it will be alright. We don't have any time to waste, anyway… Cassie is not responding after giving us the signal, which means that things are not going great out there. None of us expected that the day would come so soon, and in such a strange manner. But now that it did, there is no way back. Each of us knows what we must do — so, take Morgan and leave. Before her brother shows up."

Nightingale and Soul Reaper looked at her with concern.

Eventually, Jet spoke softly:

"Are you sure that you can do it?"

Raised by Wolves looked at her for a few moments, then grinned.

"Worry about yourself, big sister. I'll be fine."

Morgan observed them intently, trying to understand what the three were trying to achieve. Were they retreating, but leaving Raised by

Wolves behind? Why?

The woman, meanwhile, looked at Nightingale and remained silent for a bit.

Then, she grasped his shoulder for a moment and pushed him away.

"Go. I'll be fine… let's all meet in NQSC when it's all said and done. Actually, let's meet in Bastion — I know an amazing café there. Not as well as Nephis knows it, though… wait, did she take the café with her?"

Nightingale took a few steps back from her push, remained silent for a second, and then smiled.

"Are you really thinking about food even now? No... of course you are."

With that, he rose into the air and moved further away.

Soon, a magnificent dragon with scales the color of the midnight sky towered above the ruins, his eyes shining like two cold white stars.

Morgan still couldn't move — in fact, the moment Nightingale assumed his Transcendent form, she felt that the power binding her grew even more inescapable.

'Damn it…'

She had just barely managed to move one of her fingers slightly when Soul Reaper grabbed her unceremoniously and lept on the dragon's back.

Two enormous wings raised a hurricane, and the great beast shot into the dark sky.

Leaving the ruins behind…

Morgan saw a glimpse of Raised by Wolves, who was left standing alone on the rubble. Athena followed the dragon's flight with her gaze for a few moments, then turned away and faced the distant forest… where Mordret was preparing to besiege Bastion one last

time.

The ruins swiftly grew smaller, and the empty lake did, as well, soon disappearing from view.

Morgan had finally left the ruined castle after fighting to defend it for so long… the battle for Bastion was over.

At least it was for her.

Chapter-2228: Cloak and Dagger

Left alone in the ruins of true Bastion, Effie sighed and summoned her spear, leaning on it as she waited for Mordret to come.

Despite having just eaten Morgan's stew — which was surprisingly delicious, almost as if the cold princess had cooked it specifically to suit Effie's taste — she suddenly felt hungry again.

Hunger was an old friend…

'Ah, what a strange day.'

Today was a strange day for everyone, but it was especially so for Effie, because she was experiencing it differently from Jet and Kai.

That was because not too long ago — or rather, many days ago — a familiar voice had resounded in her mind, urging Effie to secretly return to the waking world. That had happened soon after Jest of Clan Dagonet attempted to kill Cassie, while she was on her way to be captured by the Queen of Worms.

Back then, the seven Saints had all been ready to face Mordret and his Transcendent vessels once again. Effie placed her tether in the ruins of true Bastion, then used the commotion to leave the Dream Realm unseen. She rushed to the rendezvous point Cassie had mentioned, expecting to meet the blind seer herself.

However, instead, the person waiting for her in an abandoned underground factory in the outskirts was none other than the Lord of Shadows.

Effie returned to true Bastion after their meeting was concluded. Next thing she knew, she traveled back in time by a few hours — meaning that she had entered the loop, died, and returned to its start like everyone else, gods knew how many times.

It was just that she retained her memories from before entering the loop for the second time now, which included the few hours of her first experience there, the meeting with the Lord of Shadows, and the things they had discussed.

Stranger still, the signal she was supposed to receive days, or maybe even weeks after the meeting was already resounding in her head. Cassie's voice was weak and distant, as if she was struggling to pierce through some kind of interference to warn Effie, and she swiftly fell silent after delivering the message.

It was so confusing that Effie's head hurt, but having been taught a bitter lesson by the Tomb of Ariel, she tried not to think about it too much.

There was no time to think about anything too deeply, anyway.

Effie had shared what she learned with Jet and Kai, and an hour later, here she was.

All alone in the creepy ruins.

Looking down, she studied the Black Beast Locket with a tense expression.

'Can I really pull this off?'

Somewhere in the illusory Bastion, an illusory moon was rising above an illusory castle. Once it rose high enough, a doorway between reality and the mirage would open in the heart of the ruins.

Effie forced herself to smile.

"Gods. What a mess…"

***

The black dragon tore the vast expanse of the dark sky, the pale light of the shattered moon reflecting from his midnight scales. He flew with incredible speed, devouring distance with insatiable hunger. Perched on his back, Jet and Morgan were assaulted by powerful winds.

Morgan was still paralyzed, but she could see where they were headed. Nightingale was flying south, leaving the lands surrounding the ruined castle far behind…

He was flying toward the Stormsea.

Soon enough, they left the broken lands behind.

The crossing was sudden. One moment, they were surrounded by moonlit darkness, and the next, a pale light of dawn was bathing them in lilac splendor. The eerie visage of the shattered moon was gone, replaced by an empty and seemingly mundane sky.

The world below was covered by the canopy of an ancient forest, and a river cut across it like a twisting ribbon.

'...Why are they heading to the sea?'

Before too long, Nightingale folded his mighty wings and plummeted toward the ground. Landing in a forest clearing, he remained motionless for a moment.

Morgan was surprised to see Soul Reaper stand and jump from the back of the dragon, landing softly on the grass.

Straightening, she turned and looked up at the great beast.

The dragon opened his maw, and an otherworldly voice escaped from it, speaking strangely human words:

"...Good luck."

Soul Reaper grinned darkly.

"Don't worry. I have two attempts, remember?"

Nightingale remained silent for a few moments. Then, his mesmerizing voice resounded above the clearing once again:

"Return alive."

She laughed and turned away, waving a hand at him.

"That... might be problematic."

Morgan was feeling more and more bewildered, failing to understand why the three government Saints were splitting up, and what exactly was their goal.

Before she could really scrutinize all the available information, though, the dragon spoke directly to her:

"Hold tight, Lady Morgan."

She could finally move again.

…Frustratingly, it was only to fulfill his second command.

As Morgan grasped the midnight scales, Nightingale soared into the sky once more. He flew south, flying faster and faster…

Then, she felt it.

The unmistakable sensation of traveling between worlds.

Suddenly, the landscape below changed. The ancient forest was gone, replaced by the endless expanse of concrete, glass, and alloy — by the vast labyrinth of NQSC.

'He returned to the waking world?'

Just as Morgan thought that, though, she felt the fabric of reality ripple around her once again, and NQSC disappeared like a mirage.

An alien sky surrounded her from all sides now, full of frigid winds and dancing snow.

'He… used his tether. Wait!'

Her eyes widened.

Nightingale had come with her to Bastion. But before that… he had been anchored in the Song Domain.

And he had never replaced his tether.

Looking down, she saw a stone city clinging to the slope of a towering volcano. A great bridge connected the volcano to a snowy mountain, and at its end, a magnificent palace of black obsidian stood, surrounded by a raging blizzard.

It was Ravenheart.

'What…'

Morgan's chest swelled with wariness and fury.

There was even a sense of betrayal.

Was Nightingale going to bring her as a gift to Song?

Was their mysterious scheme nothing more than a ploy to switch sides and ingratiate themselves to the Queen of Worms?

The dragon flew above the city, then fell through the blizzard, landing heavily on the great bridge. His terrifying talons scraped against the ancient stone, and a moment later, Morgan suddenly found herself suspended in the air.

The dragon had disappeared.

As she fell down, Nightingale — now in his human form — caught her, held her in his arms for a second, then helped her stand.

He was wearing his armor of ivory scales, already summoning his weapons.

The black palace… and its guardians… were just ahead of them, obscured by the raging snowstorm.

Morgan was suddenly able to move again.

'What the hell is going on? Ah... I don't even know anymore…'

It definitely did not seem like Nightingale was preparing to surrender.

Instead, he looked at her, hesitated for a few moments, and said:

"Lady Morgan, I know that it will sound presumptuous, after what we've just done to you. But I… would really appreciate your help."

She looked at him darkly, considering cutting his head off right then and there.

It would be a bit sad, to rob the world of that face… but also quite satisfying.

Of course, she did not forget to activate all her defensive charms, determined to not fall into the trap of his voice so thoroughly once again.

"Help with what? What exactly are you three planning?"

Nightingale remained silent for a bit, then looked in the direction of the dark palace tensely.

Finally, he took a deep breath and said:

"Well. I... intend to conquer Ravenheart."

Morgan blinked, struggling to maintain her composure.

Nightingale, meanwhile, continued.

"Most of Song forces are far away in Godgrave, but I have no doubt that the Queen left a few of her most powerful puppets behind. There are the human defenders to consider, as well… it will be a dire battle, no doubt. I am determined to win it even if I have to fight alone, but I would feel much better if you were fighting by my side."

He turned to her, hesitated for a moment, and added awkwardly:

"I am sorry for taking the chance to face Mordret away from you. But, Lady Morgan. There can still be a silver lining — after all, he has not won yet. And even if you failed to stop him from taking Bastion, wouldn't helping conquer Ravenheart instead be a kind of victory, as well?"

Morgan stared at him silently.

The Queen of Worms had sent her brother, Mordret, to conquer Bastion — the Great Citadel of Clan Valor. Morgan herself had been sent back to stop him… but Nightingale was offering her to help him conquer Ravenheart, the Great Citadel of Clan Song, instead?

That… that…

Was deeply ironic and completely insane, but also made a strange kind of sense?

It would not be an easy thing to accomplish, though, with or without her.

Morgan raised an eyebrow.

"What about the other two, then? What are they doing?"

Nightingale looked at her with surprise.

He lingered for a few moments, then said neutrally:

"Why, what else? Effie is in Bastion, while Jet is approaching Night Garden. They are going to conquer the other two Great Citadels, of course…"

Chapter-2229: Great Citadels

Ravenheart was not undefended, of course.

However, every Saint of the Song Domain was out there, on the battlefield — and even if some of them could return to the seat of the Queen's power in mere minutes by traversing the waking world, they had not done so yet.

Perhaps something that prevented them from returning was happening in Godgrave at the moment. The news Morgan received from the battlefront was usually a few days old, and if Cassia was involved, Nightingale could very well be better informed about the current situation now than she was.

The moment of attack would not have been chosen randomly.

In any case, what met them at the gates of the magnificent black palace was a force consisting of mere Awakened warriors led by Ascended commanders — much like the rear garrisons that had protected Rivergate and Bastion before Morgan and her six Saints… formerly her Saints, rather… showed up.

And the Queen's puppets, of course.

Nightingale was well-known in Ravenheart, so while the human defenders of the black palace were surprised by his impactful arrival, they were not immediately hostile. Until they noticed Morgan, that was.

The puppets, on the other hand, were hostile from the very first moment.

Strangely enough, the gates of the black palace were open, and the Dream Gate that was supposed to be standing on the slope of the volcano was now towering above the stone bridge itself, behind

Morgan and Nightingale, its immense silhouette obscured by the snowstorm.

The two of them had nowhere to retreat.

As the puppets rushed onto the great bridge and the human defenders readied their weapons, Nightingale's voice drowned out the howling of the wind, full of irresistible authority.

He only said one word:

"Stop."

The humans froze, turning into motionless sculptures. Morgan felt a faint pang of compassion for their humiliating plight, but she did not have time to dwell on that unexpected emotion.

Because the puppets ignored the Dragonslayer's command, continuing to rush at them like a tide of murderous corpses. Well, it made sense — after all, the pilgrims were merely extensions of the Queen's power. Nightingale's Aspect might have paralyzed Morgan in a moment of weakness, but she doubted that Ki Song would succumb to its insidious compulsion.

He looked at Morgan earnestly.

"Lady Morgan... if you will…"

She stared at him for a moment, still unsure what to do… was she supposed to kill him? Or help him?

Morgan felt a little exasperated.

Finally, she turned toward the rushing puppets and muttered a curse. As she dashed forward, scarlet sparks swirled around her hand, forming a vague silhouette of a sword.

"Curses!"

Her sword was still manifesting itself when the first of the pilgrims reached her. So, Morgan cut the corpse apart with her bare hand — it fell easily, hinting that the Queen was not paying close attention to

these particular puppets.

For now.

Looking up through the snow, she regarded the motionless figures of the garrison soldiers for a split second. They were not going to offer any resistance.

'...He's not planning to conquer Ravenheart without spilling a single drop of human blood, is he?'

Perhaps he was.

A moment later, the tide of puppets was upon them, and Morgan had no time to think anymore.

***

Far away, near the misty shore of the Stormsea, Jet came into view of the Night Garden.

The colossal ship was still beached, laying tilted on the shattered ground where Mordret had left it.

…Of course, he had not left it unguarded.

Somewhere out there, on one of the countless decks of the city-sized vessel, a Reflection was laying in wait, ready to slay those who would dare to covet the Great Citadel. And a powerful one at that — a being equal in strength to a Supreme Titan.

Jet had to defeat it and conquer the Night Garden.

Exhaling slowly, she headed toward the gargantuan ship with a dark smile blooming on her lips. As she walked, a cold mist surrounded her figure, turning into a sinister war scythe.

'Can I defeat a Supreme Titan?'

Probably not. However, there was a reason why she was here, and not in Ravenheart or Bastion.

It was because Jet had a unique advantage in the battle against this particular Supreme Titan. It was a Reflection, after all.

And a Reflection could only reflect what was in front of it.

Once the two of them clashed, the creature would most likely mirror Jet — which meant that it would suffer the curse of her Flaw, as well. Its soul would shatter and start leaking essence, and eventually, it would die on its own. All she had to do was force the Reflection to waste its essence while rationing her own... something Jet was a great master of, by now.

She also had her Aspect Legacy and the souls contained within it, which she could consume if needed.

And the hourglass Memory, as well.

Even if Jet lost once, she would get a second chance to destroy the Reflection. That time, she would already be familiar with the flow and pattern of the battle.

'Ah… I really hate ships…'

Reaching the hull of the Night Garden, which seemed to extend into the distance like an endless plain, she turned into a stream of icy mist and rushed up its towering slope.

***

Effie was still leaning on her spear when Mordret arrived. She knew he was coming because of how the ground trembled under the heavy footsteps of his vessels… Typhaon, Knossos, and all the rest.

She had battled them all at some point or another during the siege of Bastion. Apparently, she even destroyed most of them at least once inside the loop… that time was gone now, of course, erased forever, and she retained no memories of these legendary battles.

Which was a bit of a shame, since Effie would have really loved to remember striking down that ugly behemoth, Typhaon. Or rather, striking down Mordret while the bastard was wearing Typhaon's corpse.

Soon enough, gargantuan silhouettes rose above the ruins, and the Prince of Nothing jumped down into the desolate courtyard from the rubble of the castle's wall.

He walked toward Effie with an amused smile on his lips.

"Saint Athena…"

Mordret looked behind her, lingered for a moment, and raised an eyebrow.

"Would you be so kind as to point me to where my sister is? We have some unfinished business, she and I."

Effie studied him for a bit, then shrugged.

"Please accept my sincerest apologies, Your Highness, but I regrettably cannot. She is indisposed. Oh, but you can talk to me instead."

Mordret laughed.

"Don't tell me that she ran away? Gods… must I chase her like one would a frightened rabbit? Well, honestly, that can be quite entertaining as well. Nevertheless, I can't help but feel a bit disappointed."

He looked at Effie with a pleasant, chilling smile.

"I must admit that I am curious, though… if Morgan is gone, then why do you remain?"

Chapter-2230: Lord's Gift

Effie moved slightly, shifting her weight away from the spear to be able to raise it quickly, if need be.

Looking at Mordret calmly, she said:

"Actually, I'm also curious. Why are you still wasting your time here? Don't you know that your father is currently fighting Ki Song? If you don't hurry up and make yourself scarce, she'll kill him all on her own. That'd be pretty sad, right? I mean, since you're obsessed with revenge to a demented degree."

Mordret's smile widened a little.

"Oh, thank you for your concern. To be honest, I'll be pretty inconsolable if someone kills him before me. Incensed, even… and very, very cross with the person who robbed me of the pleasure of killing him myself. No need to worry, though — I'll depart for Godgrave as soon as I'm finished here."

He looked at Effie with an openly disdainful expression.

"...Shouldn't take me long to sort things out, anyway."

She grinned.

"You say that, but in all these years, you've never once dared to try crawling into my soul. Everyone goes around being all scared of Your Royal Highness, Prince Mordret of Nowhere, but I always suspected that you're all talk and no bite… well, figuratively speaking. You know, some of us were actually hunting Nightmare Creatures and fighting for survival each and every goddamn day while you sat around in a perfectly safe prison cell, doing nothing."

Effie chuckled.

"Even Morgan is better than you — and she literally carries her silver spoon wherever she goes, mind you. She was brave enough to leave her soul wide open, at least… and yet, what have you done despite receiving such a brazen invitation? Nothing at all. In all these months, you had not challenged her to a soul duel. Why, because doing so would have actually put your life at risk? The rest of us have to take that risk all the time, you know. Aren't you nothing but a coward?"

Mordret continued to look at her with a pleasant smile. His strange mirror-like eyes seemed to shine in the darkness with the pale radiance of the reflected moonlight, making him look quite eerie.

"How unexpectedly eloquent. Are you per chance stalling for time, Saint Athena?"

Effie smiled darkly.

"...Oops. You caught me."

He shook his head.

"Quite a clumsy attempt. What is your plan, anyway? Surely, you are not planning to fight me and my distinguished collection of Transcendent attires alone. That'd be a bit too much, even for someone as unwise as you."

There it was, the moment of truth.

The moon must have already climbed quite high above the illusory Bastion.

Effie took a deep breath.

"It sounded like you called me a fool. If a madman calls someone a fool, though, that ought to be a compliment... right? Oh, by the way, Your Highness… I wanted to ask. Do you remember the Lord of Shadows?"

Mordret's smile grew a little forced.

"The Lord of Shadows? Ah, I do… he gave me quite a fright, the last

time we met. An unusual man, to say the least. What about him?"

Effie shook her head slowly.

"Well, it seems that you left an impression, as well. Enough so that he wanted to send you a little gift."

Surrounded by the towering figures of his Transcendent vessels, Mordret allowed himself to frown slightly.

"A gift, you say? He shouldn't have."

As his vessels moved, Mordret asked pleasantly:

"What is the present?"

Effie took a step back as she activated the Black Beast Locket and summoned what was hidden inside it into the world.

'I can't believe I let that creepy bastard talk me into this…'

Her locket contained the Beast Farm, and it sometimes served as a mobile base for the Wolf Army, as well.

At the moment, however, there was something else taking residence there.

Something that made her skin crawl, and cold sweat run down her spine. As if she was sitting on a bomb.

Effie flashed Mordret a wide smile.

"Oh, nothing much… well, see for yourself."

In the next moment, something massive appeared on the rubble between her and Mordert, obscuring him from view.

It was a towering mountain of grey flesh overgrown with scarlet moss, a hundred revolting limbs extending from it like a dreadful forest.

The moment it escaped the locket, Effie suddenly found herself unable to breathe.

A terrifying presence crashed into her, pressing her into the ground. Her eyes widened, and an involuntary groan escaped from her lips.

She couldn't even look directly at the creature, afraid that her mind would be harmed by what she saw — not that she would, determined to avoid looking at it at all costs.

Well, it wasn't every day that one found themselves mere steps away from a Cursed Demon.

A Cursed Demon who was already awakening from unnatural slumber, having been somehow lulled to it by the Lord of Shadows.

The forest of revolting limbs stirred, and countless monstrous eyes suddenly opened all across the grey expanse of the harrowing being's formless body.

...Effie was already running away by then, headed for the point in the ruins where true Bastion and its illusory copy were connected.

Mordret, however, was a few moments too late to react. It took him that long to realize what he was looking at, to begin with.

But it was already too late by the time he did — precisely because he had looked.

Because there were creatures in the Dream Realm that could sense someone's gaze, and gaze back.

The Cursed Demon became aware of Mordret at the same time as Mordret became aware of it.

Effie sensed the ruins shudder and felt a deafening noise wash over her as she ran.

'...Don't look back.'

Either the Cursed Demon would kill Mordret, or it would not. Either way, the Prince of Nothing would be preoccupied for a while — hopefully, until the battle in Godgrave ended.

Unleashing a Cursed One in the heart of the Sword Domain was… a

suboptimal choice, to say the least. But Effie would be able to switch true Bastion and its illusory version back after conquering the Citadel, thus making the former a prison for the terrifying creature and containing it within the Great Mirror.

They were desperate enough to take the risk, and Mordret was dangerous enough to take no chances.

Using all her incredible physical prowess, Effie ran across the ruins like a bolt of lightning.

Chapter-2231: First Domino

There was a low groan of breaking bone, and a powerful gust of scorching wind. Somewhere far away, a piece of the battlefield plummeted into the Hollows.

The world quaked.

The King of Swords and the Queen of Worms were still locked in mortal battle, while their armies were still drowning in the flood of the abominable horrors that spilled from the dark depths. The situation was growing more desperate with each minute, and too many human lives were being wasted on the vile altar of war.

The carnage was unimaginable.

Sunny had manifested his sixth avatar, throwing it into the fight as well. Now, his mind was fully split in eight parts, and six of them were actively participating in the mayhem — it was more mental strain than he had ever endured, and while each of the incarnations was like a dark herald of death, reaping a bloody harvest in the sea of abominations, he was slowly unraveling under the pressure.

He had not unraveled yet, though… and he was not going to break any time soon.

Or ever.

'Just die…'

One of his incarnations used a black tachi to behead a frenzied Nightmare Creature, sending its body barreling back into the fissure it had emerged from with a powerful kick. The bleeding corpse got caught in the tangle of scarlet vines, and a moment later, it was torn apart by the sharp thorns and digested by the rising jungle… perhaps to provide nutrients for more abominations to be born.

[Sunny…]

Cassie's voice sounded clearer than before, hinting that her powers were slowly returning. Sunny hoped that enough of her Aspect had been released, already — he desperately needed to know what was happening beyond Godgrave, because many things depended on it.

Cassie did not disappoint.

[The loop is broken… Bastion has fallen.]

A vicious grin appeared on his face.

'Good… good…'

Jet, Effie, and Kai were the dagger they had prepared to stab the Sovereigns in the back at the perfect moment — when Anvil and Ki Song were already committed to fighting each other and could not allow themselves to be distracted. They were meant to conquer the Great Citadels.

Bastion, Ravenheart, Night Garden…

The purpose of taking them was twofold. First, it would greatly weaken the Sovereigns and diminish the power of their Domains — something that Sunny and Nephis had to achieve if they were to stand a chance against them.

Secondly, it would put all four Great Citadels, the Ivory Island included, under Neph's control as soon as she attained Supremacy herself. After all, while becoming a Supreme was the ultimate goal, that alone did not guarantee victory. A newly risen Sovereign would still be weak when facing the vast, deeply established Domains of the two Supremes.

Naturally, while conquering the Great Citadels had always been the plan, plans changed. In fact, at the level of machination Sunny and Cassie were perpetrating, there was no such thing as a concrete plan — rather, there were only complicated webs of planned actions and contingencies that were only as effective as they were adaptable.

They had never anticipated the fall of the House of Night and

Mordret's invasion of the Sword Domain, for example. Neither could they have anticipated Morgan's ingenious feat of locking herself and her brother in an improvised time loop.

However, the web of their designs had proven adaptable enough to weather these unexpected factors… with some adjustments.

One of these adjustments was the sacrifice of the Cursed Demon whom Nightmare had been lulling to sleep for almost a year. Sunny had wanted to use it against the Sovereigns, but because of how insidious and sinister Mordret was, he ultimately placed it in Effie's Black Beast Locket instead.

Not only was it going to ensure that Bastion fell into their hands, it would also temporarily remove the wild card that was the Prince of Nothing from the board and prevent him from playing a meaningful role in the final confrontation against the Sovereigns… most likely.

'Ah. I wish I saw the expression on his face…'

Sunny was smiling, but he felt cold inside.

That was because the fall of Bastion signified something very important.

It was the point of no return.

Now that the time loop was broken, and the Great Citadel was torn from the fabric of the Sword Domain, countless mundane people living there had been rendered defenseless against the tyranny of the Nightmare Spell.

They were not in the throes of the First Nightmare yet — some time was needed for the infection to take hold, after all. Because of the loop created by Morgan, they would have lost the protection of the Sword Domain mere hours ago.

By now, the entire mundane population of the city — people like Beth — would be slowly starting to feel a strange fatigue. Then, they would start feeling sleepy. And they would only be thrown into the Nightmare after succumbing to sleep.

That meant that Sunny and Nephis had some time, still, to defeat the Sovereigns.

More importantly, at least one of them had to attain Supremacy in the process.

Otherwise, even if they somehow emerged victorious from the battle, they would have to pay a terrible price for that triumph.

The death toll would be staggering…

It would be ruinous.

…But the number of Awakened humans would explode exponentially, as well.

That was why Sunny could not help but tremble while he forced a smile onto his face.

'This... this is our will. Who dares...'

And as if to aggravate his horror, Cassie's voice resounded once again in his head:

[...Ravenheart has fallen.]

And, only moments later:

[Night Garden has fallen.]

It was done.

Sunny took a shaky breath, and then sent one of his incarnations through the shadows, emerging from them in the core of the vast sea of desperately fighting humans.

It only took him a few moments to reach Nephis.

She was fighting at the head of the drowning army, wreathed in radiant flames and surrounded by ash. With her silver hair, incandescent blade, and white wings, Nephis looked like an annihilating angel... the single gem of the Crown of Dawn shone with

pure light on her forehead, resembling a third eye.

The scorching heat had created an empty space around her, and the soldiers were dozens of meters back, battling the tide of abominations with dark resolve. The surface of the ancient bone was soaked with blood and littered with hideous corpses.

Sunny lingered for a moment, and then said evenly:

"It is done. And we… we can't wait anymore."

Nephis glanced at him silently, then looked in the direction where Anvil and Ki Song were fighting each other.

Neither of the Sovereigns was at the death's door yet, which was not a part of the plan.

But too many people were dying. And Sunny and Nephis were wasting too much essence.

And plans had to change.

He took a deep breath, then steeled his heart.

"We must attack now."

Here it was. The moment they had been waiting for, hoping for… and dreading… for so long.

Their chance to conquer the world.

Or die trying.

'Finally.'

Nephis remained expressionless for a few moments, white flames dancing in her eyes.

Eventually, she turned away and looked up.

"Then we attack."

Chapter-2232: Cold Front

"Then we attack."

There was nothing more to say.

The time for words had run out.

Nephis crouched slightly, and then shot into the sky. Surrounded by beautiful radiance, she was like a white star ascending into the tempestuous expanse of the stormy sky — the soldiers watched her flight with numb expressions, her pure light reflecting in their eyes.

Far above, the Ivory Island moved. Its seven chains rattled as the flying island dove into the storm of swords, weathering the fury of obliterating steel with indomitable stillness.

Left alone on the ground, Sunny temporarily filled the emptiness left by Neph's departure — his fearsome onyx armor was already awash with blood, and more was added to the crimson coat as he cut down powerful Nightmare Creatures that threatened the core of the human army.

But despite all his deadly grace and chilling strength, the Lord of Shadows was a poor substitute for Changing Star. His sword was just as ferocious as hers, true, and he could slay abominations just as well. However, he could not heal the wounds of the fallen soldiers, and he could not bolster their faltering courage with hope either.

But that was alright.

Because Sunny had his own ways.

Some distance away, the original incarnation of the Lord of Shadows — the dark swordsman wearing a fearsome mask — reached one of the wider fissures in the bone, a trail of death and destruction in his

wake. His black odachi rose and fell, cleansed of all blood in one swift and fluid motion.

Then, the serpentine blade rippled like a stream of liquid darkness. A moment later, it had already transformed into a long, tenebrous spear.

Sunny looked past the slithering mass of scarlet vines, into the depths of the jagged fissure. He remained motionless for a moment, and then cast his spear down into the darkness.

The spear let out a thunderous roar as it broke the sound barrier, falling into the depths of Hollows. Its dark descent mirrored Neph's radiant ascent into the sky almost perfectly.

By the time Nephis reached the Ivory Island, Serpent pierced the thick canopy of the scarlet jungle and hit the ground with a powerful explosion, a deep crater forming in the spot where it struck the ground.

The jungle was like an inconceivable being that had awoken from deep slumber, teeming with abominable movement and life. Great pillars of intertwined vines were growing at unnatural speed to connect the depths to the surface like tendrils of fleshy tissue. Countless Nightmare Creatures were rushing to climb them, driven mad by the scent of human souls.

Of course, the sudden explosion had not gone unnoticed. Many abominations veered from their paths, approaching the point of impact with frenzied snarls.

What met them was a piercing, eerie chill flowing out of the deep crater. The pit itself was swirling with a strange white haze, and the air above it was so cold that drops of condensate water were falling down like rain.

Tiny sparks were dancing in the pillars of light that poured through the broken dome of the Hollows, glistening like precious jewels.

These jewels… were flakes of snow.

As the eerie chill spread, turning infinitely more violent and

tyrannical in a split second, the drops of rain turned into ice, and the white haze exploded from the crater, growing into a furious snowstorm.

Then, a terrifying silhouette rose from the crater.

It was a massive creature of an eerie and grotesque shape, made entirely from ice. The ice was inky and black, but the creature was full of color due to numerous flowers blooming on its surface, their petals an intense azure color.

The contrast between the vibrant beauty of the flowers and the appalling body beneath was striking. Vast plumes of snow drifted from the flowers like pollen, shrouding the creature in a frosty haze. At the heart of the eerie abomination, barely visible through the ice, there was a small shadow that vaguely resembled human remains.

It was Serpent, who had assumed the form of the Corrupted Titan… Winter Beast.

Winter Beast, that vile horror.

A long time ago, Sunny had lost his cohort to its profane power.

Later, he returned to the frigid expanse of Antarctica and killed it.

And now that he himself was a Titan, Sunny could finally command that power for himself.

'Freeze, all of you…'

As a storm of swords was raging in the sky above Godgrave, a snowstorm suddenly consumed the dark depths of the Hollows. Chilling winds blew with ferocious power, bending the ancient trees of the jungle to the ground. The streams and rivers turned to ice. Countless vermin were instantly annihilated, frozen solid by the unnatural cold, and shattered as they fell down.

A few of the vine bridges were frozen and snapped, as well. Those that were still rising slowed their growth, sapped of life. Countless Nightmare Creatures plummeted down, their roars drowning in the howling wind.

Of course, the inhabitants of the abominable jungle could not be compared to the refugees of Falcon Scott and the brave soldiers of the First Evacuation Army… they were far more powerful, far more ancient, and far more resilient. Most of them were Corrupted themselves, and far too many were of the Great Rank.

Even exposed to the deathly cold of the Winter Beast's frigid domain, they did not succumb to its icy grasp.

But they did not escape unscathed either. Enveloped by the wind and the swirling snow, the Nightmare Creatures were weakened, wounded, and slowed down.

[You have slain a…]

[You have slain a…]

[You have slain a…]

Distracted by the cacophonous litany of voices, Sunny silenced the Handy Bracelet. He had unleashed a frigid hell in the Hollows, and the harvest of abominable lives Serpent was reaping was uncountable.

And every life Serpent reaped sent a trickle of essence flowing into Sunny's soul due to its [Soul Reaver] Ability.

So, a torrent of essence drowned him like a flood, replenishing his spent reserves.

Much more importantly…

The soldiers desperately fighting for survival in the sweltering heat of Godgrave suddenly felt a wave of mercifully cold air wash over them, and saw billowing plumes of snow rising from the cracks in the bone plain.

The flood of Nightmare Creatures that threatened to drown them did not exhaust itself, but it did grow less overwhelming. Fewer abominations were emerging from below, and those that did crawl to the surface seemed weakened, covered in ice and moving slowly.

The pressure on the warriors of the two warring Domains was alleviated somewhat, and they could finally breathe… at least for a moment.

Sunny smiled darkly behind Weaver's mask.

Sure, he was not like Nephis, who inspired hope and healed the wounded soldiers.

But he could inspire fear and bring death to the frenzied Nightmare Creatures.

His way was not any less effective.

Chapter-2233: Wrath of Heaven

Out there on the battlefield, the consequences of the three Great Citadels falling could already be felt.

Anvil seemed strangely unaffected, fighting in the same cold and calculated, ruthlessly callous manner — but he had to have felt his power diminishing greatly when Effie took control of Bastion.

Strangely enough, though, this significant loss could only help him at the moment… and he was in dire need of help, being pressed and battered by the fierce onslaught of the Queen.

That was because the King only lost one Great Citadel, while the Queen lost two. So, while the sudden betrayal of the government Saints did weaken both Sovereigns, it actually served to narrow the gap between them, greatly improving Anvil's position.

One could see the results already.

The towering flesh golem containing the blood essence of the Ki Song staggered, allowing one of the King's swords to deal it a grievous wound. A strange wave spread through the sea of puppets, slowing them down for a few precious moments. Many fell victim to the storm of flying swords as a result.

Most importantly of all, the great fissure of the Dream Gate rippled, and then collapsed on itself, disappearing without a trace soon after. The torn fabric of reality slowly repaired itself — with the loss of Night Garden, the Queen had lost the Component that allowed her to connect two areas of the Dream Realm, as well.

Therefore, not only did the power of her Domain weakened greatly, but its presence in Godgrave was also severely diminished.

Anvil did not waste any time, pressing his temporary advantage and

bombarding Ki Song with a maelstrom of devastating attacks… almost as if he had been ready for the sudden reversal.

Her titanic flesh golem, which had seemed indestructible, was slowly coming undone under the barrage of merciless attacks. It was being destroyed faster than she could repair it.

And yet, their battle did not turn any tamer. If anything, it only grew more calamitous.

If before the Sovereigns seemed to be holding back some of their power to defend themselves, then they focused on pure aggression now. The puppets and the flying swords discarded all caution to destroy the enemy, too.

The fractured bone plain quaked and groaned, more pieces of it collapsing into the snowstorm raging in the Hollows. The entire battlefield seemed to be swaying on the verge of collapse.

It could not continue for much longer…

And it didn't.

Because, at that moment, the battered Ivory Island revealed itself from the storm of swords directly above where Anvil and Ki Song were fighting.

And then, in the rattle of chains…

Came the Crushing.

An invisible force descended upon the shattered battlefield, flattening the rising tendrils of the abominable jungle and pressing the Queen's puppets into the ground. Countless swords plummeted from the sky, scraping against the bone before rising up again, their blades trembling from the strain.

For a few moments, the calamitous battle seemed to have frozen.

And, under everyone's gazes, Changing Star of the Immortal Flame descended from the sky, landing softly on the ground between the two Sovereigns.

With her silver hair dancing in the air, she folded her white wings and lowered her incandescent sword. Her clear voice rang above the ravaged battlefield:

"Stop this madness!"

***

"Stop this madness!"

Nephis spoke these words, knowing that they were meaningless.

The Sovereigns would not listen, and she did not want them to listen. All she wanted was to kill them.

How could she not, after waiting for a chance to slay her abusers for all these years?

For all her life…

And it had not been an easy one, that life of hers.

From the broken dreams of her childhood to the blood-soaked battlefield of her adulthood, Nephis had always been driven by a singular, uncompromising desire.

To conquer the Nightmare Spell and destroy it… to obliterate, decimate, and bring it to ruin.

Not because she was a noble hero, but simply because she loathed it. Nephis was consumed by hatred, shaped by it…

She was no hero.

And yet, she had to pretend to be one. Because no one could survive the ruthless world of the Nightmare Spell alone. She needed the support and faith of those who believed in her to destroy it, just as much as they needed her… and she needed to obliterate those who stood in her way.

That was why the Sovereigns had to die. Not because they had ruined her family and haunted her childhood nightmares like monsters, but

simply because they were... inept. They might have been great and brilliant once, but they had lost their way.

One did not exclude the other, though.

Today, she was going to remove an obstacle on the path to fulfilling her ardent desire.

And she was also going to have her revenge.

Looking at them — the proud King in his vermilion cloak, the Queen hiding inside her grotesque golem — Nephis could feel it.

A roaring flame igniting in her soul, drowning her mind, and engulfing her heart.

The flame of wrath, the flame of hatred.

Scorching, overwhelming... impossible to deny.

And so, telling them to stop felt like torture, because Nephis wanted nothing more than to carve their souls and bodies with her sword.

These ghouls… she had endured tolerating their existence for too long.

Today, they were going to die. Her will was absolute.

Looking at her, Anvil suddenly let out a low chuckle.

"And what if we don't stop, Nephis?"

She looked at him, lingered for a moment, and then pointed her sword at him.

"Then, I will stop you."

There was more she had to say… an entire speech, in fact, that Cassie and Sunny had prepared far in advance. A clever argument that listed all the crimes the Sovereigns had committed, advocated for the safety of the Awakened soldiers, hammered down the senselessness of a civil war, and painted a rosy picture of the future.

For everyone interested to hear.

But Nephis could not wait anymore. She had waited for too long, already.

Words were cheap, anyway. Her actions would speak louder.

Anvil looked at her silently, then asked in a cold voice:

"Is it really wise, to point a sword that I myself forged at me?"

With that, her sword — the Kinslayer — suddenly moved on its own. Flying from her hand, it rushed to Anvil and turned to point at her own chest, hovering above his shoulder.

Just as expected.

Nephis smiled as she dismissed it.

"If you insist… I'll kill you with a better sword, forged by a better smith…"

She summoned the Blessing.

Chapter-2234: Darkness Falls

Far away, one of Sunny's incarnations was sitting on the steps of the Nameless Temple.

The small camp the soldiers sent to him by the Sword Army had built was empty now. They had been recalled and left for Vanishing Lake to participate in the clandestine attack on the Lesser Crossing Stronghold… which never took place, in the end.

By now, they were out there on the battlefield, trying to survive in the cataclysm caused by the Sovereigns. Many of them were probably dead, torn apart or turned into puppets.

The Nameless Temple was eerily quiet.

Sunny had spent a long time alone here, but he usually had the company of his Shadows. Saint, Fiend, Serpent, Nightmare… they were on the battlefield too, helping him hold back the tide of abominations.

He felt strangely lonesome despite the sleeping army of Great Nightmare Creatures hidden in the darkness behind him, and the invisible presence of the Temple Guardian.

Of course, his solitude was not destined to last. His shadow sense spread far and wide, encompassing the dark expanse of the Shadow Realm's Fragment. That was why he could already feel it… the ragged force of the Song soldiers approaching him from the north.

And their commanders, of course.

Lonesome Howl, Death Singer…

He could not sense Silent Stalker, though, which meant that she was already somewhere close, aiming her arrows at him.

Sunny did not move.

Finally, the soldiers entered the empty camp, shivering as the eerie silence enveloped them.

The daughters of Ki Song were the first to reach the dark edifice of the temple. They stopped, staring at him with tense expressions.

In the end, it was Lonesome Howl who spoke:

"Lord of Shadows… we meet again."

Her voice was boisterous, but he could feel a hint of fear hidden deep within it.

Sunny tilted his head a little.

"You were sent to take the Nameless Temple, then?"

She smiled.

"Sure. It's a bit funny, though… oxymoron, or what have you. Your Citadel is called the Nameless Temple — that's its name. So it's not very nameless, is it?"

He hesitated for a moment, amused.

"Perhaps. So, tell me, what's the logic? Last time, I beat thirteen of you. Now there's only three. Are you that impatient to die?"

Lonesome Howl's smile faltered for a moment, then brightened again.

"Ah… but most of you is far away. So, I like our chances."

Her bravado was ruined by Death Singer, though, who chose that exact moment to yell:

"Death! Oh, death! We're all going to die! I sense it!"

Sunny stared at her for a moment, smiling, then shook his head.

"Well… naturally. Everyone dies one day. Only the Void is everlasting — so, I guess you are right."

Death Singer fell silent and looked back at him with wide eyes.

"I'm… right? Me? Uh… can you repeat that, Sir Lord of Shadows? Louder?"

With that, she turned her head and glanced at Lonesome Howl vindictively.

Sunny chuckled.

"...Sorry to disappoint, though. You're not dying today."

It was time.

The Nameless Temple had long accumulated enough essence to travel, and the stage was set for the Lord of Shadows to make his entrance.

As Sunny rose to his feet, he saw the daughters of Ki Song, and the soldiers behind them, flinch.

He smiled behind the visor of his helmet.

"Oh, but you might become orphans..."

With that, he activated the Component of his Citadel and envisioned the calamitous battlefield.

As the warriors of Song watched him warily, readying themselves for the lethal battle against the terrifying Saint of Godgrave…

The ancient edifice of the dark temple turned hard to focus on.

And then, they were suddenly blinded by bright light.

"Argh!"

Lonesome Howl raised a hand to cover her eyes and swayed.

A wave of familiar heat washed over her.

When she could see again, an expression of shock appeared on her face.

The Nameless Temple… was gone, as if it had never existed at all.

And with it, the unnatural darkness that veiled this entire region of Godgrave had disappeared as well.

In front of them, there was nothing but a white expanse of bone, ending in an abyssal drop to the distant spine of the dead deity.

Above them was the radiant veil of clouds.

"W—what the hell?"

The Lord of Shadows and his Citadel… were gone like a mirage.

And almost at the same time as they disappeared from the southern edge of the Breastbone Reach, they appeared on the northern edge, in the middle of the battlefield, right below the Ivory Island.

The Fragment of the Shadow Realm traveled with the Nameless Temple, as well. Sunny had not been able to move it before, and he could not do it now either — however, he wagered his hopes on a trick. By anchoring the Fragment to his Citadel, he had hoped that moving the Citadel would result in the vast shroud of darkness moving with it, too.

Luckily, it had worked. The fractured bone plain was suddenly enveloped by deep shadows, obscuring the distant sky. The shadows swallowed it all — the shattered bone, the scarlet jungle, the sea of puppets, the storm of swords, the flood of Nightmare Creatures... and the drowning army.

And the Sovereigns, as well.

Now, their trap was complete.

Serpent was raging below the Sovereigns, hidden in the heart of a profane snowstorm.

The Ivory Island hung in the sky above them, pressing the two into the ground with the obliterating power of the Crushing.

The Fragment of Shadow Realm was all around them. As a piece of a

Divine Domain — albeit one belonging to a dead god — it possessed a power of its own, and that power was suppressing the Domains of the two Supremes.

And they had lost a lot of that power already — both during the war and when the three Great Citadels were stolen from them.

There was the Nameless Temple itself, too, its invisible guardian, and the Great Nightmare Creatures slumbering in the cool darkness of its great hall.

Sunny and Nephis had done all they could to give themselves a chance to defeat the King and the Queen... to vanquish the Sovereigns.

Now, all they could do was fight.

Standing on the steps of the Nameless Temple, no more than a dozen meters away, Sunny looked at Anvil with cold arrogance.

His voice sounded aloof...

"She's talking about me, by the way. I'm the better smith."

Chapter-2235: Feeble Flame of Hope

First came the cold.

Then came the darkness.

It rose from below, swallowing the land, devouring the heavens, and blotting out the light of day…

The soldiers, who had been tormented by blinding light and suffocated by heat for many long months, let out sighs of relief and basked in the cool embrace of shadows. Luminous Memories swiftly ignited above the drowning army, and they fought against the rising tide of Nightmare Creatures with renewed vigor.

Of course, it was a bit strange for snow to rise from the Hollows and for deep darkness to envelop the world… but the soldiers had seen and survived too many bizarre events here in Godgrave to care about yet another one. All of them, both those who had Awakened before the Chain of Nightmares and after it, were seasoned veterans now. They had been honed and tempered by the war, experiencing enough horrors to make them numb to eerie strangeness.

All they knew was that the Lord of Shadows had something to do with it, and that he was assisting Changing Star.

Changing Star herself was out there, far away in the distance, standing between the King and the Queen. Her radiant figure was like a pure white beacon in the ocean of darkness, and although few could hear her speak, everyone understood what she was doing… attempting to do.

She was trying to stop the mad battle between the two Sovereigns to spare the dying soldiers and save them all. The last daughter of the

Immortal Flame had always been the voice of reason in this appalling war — in fact, she was the only one who had protested against it. And now, her voice was their only hope.

Perhaps the Supremes would listen…

If not, perhaps Changing Star would find another way to end the war.

That faint hope burned in the hearts of the desperate soldiers, and they clung to it desperately, even while knowing full well how futile it was. Hope was a resilient thing, after all… it was far more resilient than reason.

And there was fuel nurturing its feeble flame, as well.

The advance of the liberated jungle, which had threatened to drown the two great armies minutes before, was slower now. The dreadful battle of the Supremes, which had threatened to destroy the very ground beneath them, temporarily came to a halt.

For a few moments, the soldiers allowed themselves to believe in salvation…

But then, as they cast their gazes ahead, to where Changing Star was standing, their expressions changed.

Their eyes widened, and their faces became twisted by horror.

***

Not long before that, Sunny walked down the steps of the Nameless Temple, looking at Anvil coldly.

At the same time, a bright flame flared from Neph's hand, forming into a beautiful silver blade. The Blessing flared to life, its incandescent radiance fusing with her own and making it much more brilliant, thus causing the surrounding shadows to grow deeper.

Anvil did not pay Sunny attention, staring at the brilliant sword as if enchanted by it.

"...You forged this blade?"

His voice was full of a strange, subdued emotion.

As Sunny walked down the steps, his incarnations rose from the shadows behind him. One, two, three… eventually, seven identical figures in fearsome black armor stepped onto the weathered bone.

Seven cold voices resounded like a choir, fusing in an eerie harmony:

"Yes."

"No."

A quiet laugh resounded above the fractured battlefield, and six incarnations of the Lord of Shadows suddenly turned into six rivers of pure darkness, flowing into the seventh. As they were absorbed by it, his usually subtle presence grew impossible to ignore, brimming with a cold and sinister power.

The darkness, which had seemed impenetrable before, turned even deeper and more unfathomable.

As the shadows wrapped themselves around him, Sunny smiled behind Weaver's Mask. Having been scattered around the Dream Realm for so long, he had missed the feeling of being embraced by his shadows… he had grown tired of not being able to enjoy his true power. Now that he enjoyed the familiar boon of being augmented by his invaluable helpers, the future seemed a little brighter.

"I am not going to enjoy killing you, King of Swords."

Anvil stared at the Blessing for a few more moments, then turned to Sunny.

"No, you won't."

His next words were addressed to Nephis:

"So, are you really going to challenge me as a mere Saint, girl? How bold… how brave. How misguided."

Nephis regarded him calmly, brilliant radiance burning under her skin.

Her voice crackled with the furious roaring of an annihilating flame:

"You're just a Sovereign."

Anvil chuckled.

At the same time, the flesh golem moved, and every puppet on the vast battlefield simultaneously turned their heads, all staring at Nephis with empty eyes.

The nearest of them opened its monstrous mouth and spoke, its voice resounding above the fractured plain. A moment later, another dead abomination continued, their hollow, inhuman voices brimming with chilling amusement:

"Ah… I am feeling ignored. Don't you have any words to spare for me, as well, little Nephis?"

Neph shifted her gaze and looked at the grotesque flesh golem, white flames dancing in her eyes.

Her tone did not change.

"You should have killed me a long time ago. Now, it's too late."

With that, she spread her white wings and prepared to attack.

The Crushing was pressing the Sovereigns into the ground, but it was sparing her and Sunny. Controlling it with such precision was not easy, and would not be possible for much longer — but in that short time, the physical power of their terrifying enemies would be severely diminished.

Sunny and Nephis had to use that time to if not kill, then at least gravely wound the Sovereigns.

However, fate had other plans in store.

As Sunny reached into the shadows, shaping them into a weapon, Anvil raised his sword.

His voice was cold and even.

"If you want to face me, girl, face me yourself. Don't rely on toys."

With that, the cursed blade hissed, cutting the air.

Sunny wanted to dodge, but the strike was not aimed at him. Neither was it aimed at Nephis.

Instead, Anvil seemed to be cutting the sky.

And something in the sky was severed.

Looking up, Sunny could not help but flinch.

'How…'

His hand trembled.

Out there, in the sky, the Ivory Island…

Was falling.

Chapter-2236: Heir of Peace

The Ivory Tower… Tower of Hope… had been built by the Demon of Desire, and became her prison later. Of course, a prison capable of containing a daemon could not have been fragile — the great pagoda and the island it stood upon had weathered Hope's thousand years of imprisonment, the Doom War, and countless years of desolation that followed.

So, even Anvil of Valor was not powerful enough to destroy it.

And he didn't.

Instead, he cut the very concept that held the Ivory Island in the air, temporarily throwing the sorcery that allowed it to fly into disarray.

The island plummeted down, its massive shape tilting as the seven torn chains rattled loudly. The placid lake resting on its surface spilled over the edge, forming a vast waterfall. The bones of the dragon that lay curled around the great pagoda moved, tearing the ground.

Far away, the soldiers were terrified by the sight of the symbol of their hope falling from the sky.

Sunny's eyes widened.

'Crap!'

The massive island was falling… and the Nameless Temple was situated directly below it.

The shadows stirred, ready to arrest the island's fall. Sunny had stopped a walking mountain once… for a few moments… and he was much stronger now. And yet, he was not sure that he would be able to stop the falling mass of the flying Citadel.

The Ivory Island did not crash into the Nameless Temple, though. Before it could, an invisible presence rose above the dark edifice and barred its path, causing the entire island to shudder and change course. It veered to the side, tilting, and hit the bone plain heavily hundreds of meters away.

The battlefield trembled. The world quaked...

The ancient bone crumbled.

Countless tons of shattered bone plummeted into the billowing clouds of snow, and a massive hole formed in the ground where the Ivory Island struck it. The Island itself crashed through the fractured plain, pulling more of the battlefield crumbling down with it, and sank into the cold darkness of the Hollows.

Soon enough, it disappeared from view, leaving a jagged chasm many kilometers across on the surface of the Breastbone Reach. Everything inside was obscured by snow, but a few moments later, another terrifying impact shook the world as the flying island broke the canopy of the abominable jungle and collided with the ground.

The snow was pushed into the dark sky...

And a lone figure was revealed on the edge of the vast chasm, rising unsteadily from the shattered bone.

It was a slender young man with porcelain skin and attractive features, wearing a black mantle and a dazed expression.

He was Master Sunless… the charming enchanter whom Changing Star had brought to Godgrave as a Memory Purveyor of the Fire Keepers.

Her infamous lover.

Anvil looked at him with disdain, then glanced at his adopted daughter.

"...I'll take this toy from you, as well. To help you rid yourself of unnecessary distractions."

Before Nephis could even move, one of his seven dreadful swords shot forward with terrifying speed. It moved so swiftly, and with such daunting power, that space itself seemed to rip around its chillingly sharp blade. The sword reached its victim in the blink of an eye, poised to pierce the delicate Master and turn his body into a cloud of crimson haze…

But instead, something that even the King of Swords could not have expected happened, causing both Sovereigns to halt.

The dazed enchanter raised his arm in a seemingly unhurried fashion…

And caught the dreadful blade with his bare hand.

The snow behind him exploded in all directions, torn apart by a devastating shockwave, and the hems of his mantle danced in the air. The young man himself, however, did not even sway, standing there motionlessly like an exquisite statue.

As the hurricane wind settled, he looked at the sword trapped in his seemingly weak hand, and his beautiful face was suddenly illuminated by a faint smile.

"...Ouch."

As he tightened his grasp, cracks appeared on the dreadful blade, and then it shattered into a myriad of scarlet sparks.

Taking a calm step forward, the charming enchanter shook his hand in the air under Anvil's dismayed gaze.

"Seems like her toys are of much better quality than yours, King of Swords… if I do say so myself."

With that, he grinned shamelessly.

A moment later, something even more astonishing happened.

The terrifying Lord of Shadows — the sinister Saint whose dark and dreadful power was only equal to the chilling mystery of his true identity — suddenly turned into a swift shadow that glided across the

surface of the shattered bone and happily wrapped itself around the charming enchanter's body.

Suddenly, he did not look weak anymore. His pleasant smile disappeared, replaced by a dark and chillingly cold expression.

"That said…"

As he took the next step, a fearsome onyx armor encased his body, and a frightening black mask of a snarling demon hid his beautiful face.

"...I'm a little mad now."

A dark odachi suddenly appeared in his hand, and he pointed its tip at Anvil.

"How about we settle it with swords, heir of War?"

Anvil lingered for a moment, then dismissed his helmet, smiling with dark satisfaction.

"As you wish, heir of Peace."

A moment later, he was already upon Sunny.

Almost at the same time, the titanic flesh golem lunged at Nephis.

Now that the Ivory Island had disappeared below ground, the Crushing was not slowing them down anymore.

And neither was it hindering the legion of the dead puppets and the storm of flying swords anymore.

The battlefield, which had grown still for a few short minutes, exploded with motion and violence once again.

But before the Queen's puppets and the King's swords could descend upon Sunny and Nephis…

Something moved in the darkness behind the open gates of the Nameless Temple.

A moment later, a litany of harrowing roars suddenly drowned the vast expanse of the fractured battlefield.

The darkness stirred, and the first of the Great abominations that Nightmare had lulled to sleep lunged from it in a maelstrom of terrifying claws and fangs, followed by another, and another…

The swarm of dreadful Nightmare Creatures slammed into the puppets, and a feast of carnage unlike anything Sunny had ever seen suddenly took place on the surface of the shattered plain.

Chapter-2237: King of Swords

The swarm of Great Nightmare Creatures escaped the gates of the Nameless Temple like a monstrous tide. Their grotesque and harrowing forms loomed in darkness, and the darkness bloomed with the frenzied scarlet flames of countless hungry eyes.

A terrifying litany of bestial wails shook the world.

A moment later, countless fangs sank into dead flesh and countless claws shattered enchanted steel. There were beings among the liberated Great Ones who resembled beasts, and there were those who defied description. Having shaken off the shackles of the Dream Curse, these dreadful creatures were overcome with fury, hunger, and the chilling scars left on their souls by the endless nightmares.

The dead puppets, the flying swords, and the ancient predators of the abominable jungle — these three armies clashed on the fractured battlefield, unleashing a devastating wave of violence.

Sunny was not a Sovereign, but his army of abominations was not that inferior to the other two Supreme forces. Of course, there were far fewer of them than there were of the Queen's puppets and of the King's swords. But each Great Nightmare Creature was far more powerful than most individual minions of the Supremes were, and as a result, the carnage of their onslaught was simply chilling.

There was a simple trick to why Sunny was able to match the Sovereigns as a mere Transcendent, in that regard…

It was because, unlike them, he had no control over his army whatsoever.

Nightmare had spent more than a year slowly lulling the Great Ones to slumber, but now that they broke free, Sunny had no power over the harrowing swarm of frenzied abominations at all. They were just

as likely to devour him as they were his enemies… so, he would be wise to stay away from his own monsters.

Perhaps it would have been even wiser not to unleash scores of Great Nightmare Creatures in close proximity to himself, but there was no putting this particular genie back in the bottle.

In any case, he had done what had to be done. The abominations would stall the sea of puppets and the storm of swords for some time, at least — giving him and Nephis time to deal with the Sovereigns in person.

Or be dealt with by the Sovereigns, instead.

'How thrilling…'

Anvil was already a split second away from descending upon Sunny in all his harrowing might. However, at that moment — strangely enough — Sunny found himself neither shaken nor wary. Instead, he was curious.

How would he fare in the battle against a Supreme?

This was the first time Sunny felt his true power as a Titan. His original body and the Onyx Mantle encasing it were both augmented by all seven of his shadows, making him feel strong enough to crush entire mountains under his palm. His speed, his endurance, his resilience — all of him was empowered by the embrace of shadows, becoming…

Titanic.

Beyond that, he was also being nurtured by the Fragment of the Shadow Realm, pushing his physical prowess even further. Essence flowed into his soul like a river, both from being surrounded by the purest form of his source element and because of Serpent waging war on the scarlet jungle below…

And as much as Sunny was empowered, Anvil was suppressed.

'Do I stand a chance, I wonder?'

The first attack came faster than lightning. It was so fast, in fact, that Sunny could not even see it — he could only sense it through the movement of shadows. Time seemed to slow down to a crawl, and the snowflakes froze in the air, shining like cold stars in the night sky as they reflected Neph's brilliant radiance.

Anvil's cursed sword descended upon him like an ill omen, twisting the very space around it…

And moving through the frozen time, Sunny dodged it with the practiced ease of a master swordsman.

Sidestepping the attack, he pushed himself forward. At this speed, the air itself was like a wall barring his path — Sunny shattered that wall easily and thrust his odachi into Anvil's unprotected face.

Cold contempt glistened in the Sovereign's grey eyes.

'Ah… I made a mistake.'

Ignoring the laws of inertia, Anvil's sword instantly changed direction and transitioned to a horizontal slash from a downward cut. He struck Sunny with the flat of the blade, causing a crack to appear on the surface of the Onyx Mantle and sending Sunny staggering back. A dull pain radiated through his abdomen, and he tasted blood on his tongue.

There were rules to swordsmanship. The footwork, the human anatomy, the application of force — however, Anvil commanded a force that broke all the rules, refusing to obey any law that had not been made by him. He could control metal itself, and therefore, his sword could move in any direction he wanted, at any speed.

His body was encased in a suit of steel armor as well, and therefore, observing his footwork was of no use.

"Let me show you swordsmanship, worm…"

Hearing Anvil's indifferent voice, Sunny smiled faintly.

'Crap.'

In the next moment, a barrage of attacks descended upon him like a steel storm. There were too many of them to count, and each carried the devastating power of a Supreme. Anvil's assault was inescapable and tyrannical, as if the sky itself was falling upon Sunny.

The cursed sword the King held in his hands was the most vicious, but the five blades levitating around him were no less deadly. The shattered bone cracked under Sunny's boots as he evaded and dodged, then exploded a moment later when the cuts aimed for his body bit into it with obliterating force.

Sunny's black odachi deflected a few strikes and blocked a few more, then was cut cleanly and crumbled into a stream of shadows. A new sword appeared in his hand almost instantly — then, four more arms were formed from shadows, each grasping its own blade.

He survived the barrage of attacks, somehow, realizing with a shudder that the eternity of murderous steel he weathered only lasted for a heartbeat.

And that there was one last wave of attacks he could not escape.

His blades were broken, and his shadow hands were severed.

The cursed sword flew toward him, with nothing to stop it from piercing his heart.

…Just before it pierced him, though, Sunny simply dissolved into the shadows and stepped out of them behind Anvil, delivering a crushing blow to the Sovereign's back.

'What is it with this guy and calling all his enemies worms?'

Sunny grinned behind Weaver's Mask.

"How about I show you swordsmanship, instead?"

As Anvil used his Aspect to right his body and turn, the five dreadful swords becoming a sphere of rustling steel around him, Sunny switched his stance and channeled a flowing and unpredictable battle style — the first style he had ever learned.

The style Nephis had inherited from Broken Sword, and he inherited from her.

Anvil's eyes darkened.

Chapter-2238: Unassailable

Anvil of Valor was perhaps the most brilliant warrior of his generation… the most brilliant warrior of those who were still alive, at least.

He had been born and bred to be the epitome of martial prowess, spent decades fighting bloody battles on countless battlefields, led glorious conquests of numerous vast regions of the Dream Realm, and solidified the rule of the Great Clan Valor over the world with his sword and his hammer.

In some sense, he was the personification of the Second Generation. He was powerful, he was fearsome… he was tyrannical and domineering.

But Sunny was a terrifying presence on the battlefield himself. And, as one of the most powerful Awakened warriors in history, he was more than worthy enough to represent his own generation.

The Third Generation was harder to describe than the previous two. The members of the First Generation had survived the descent of the Nightmare Spell and built the foundation of a new world order. The Second Generation, having been the first to be born into the ruthless world of the Nightmare Spell, grew up to subjugate it and build upon that foundation.

The Third Generation had not been shaped by such distinct events, and neither had it achieved anything as noteworthy. Perhaps what had truly shaped it was the fall of North America — and the previous two generations of Awakened, as well.

So, today, the members of the Third Generation were going to distinguish it by vanquishing the very people who had shaped it. The future was fighting against the past, longing to escape its iron grasp.

…As Sunny attacked, his Transcendent Battle Art fully revealed itself. His movements were swift and flowing, guided by his shadow sense instead of vision. His sword was fierce and vicious, carrying the weight of a mountain or turning light as a feather the next moment. Each attack was ruthlessly lethal and imbued with dreadful power, causing devastating shockwaves to shake the world after each strike.

Sunny himself was sinister and elusive, freely moving between the shadows. It was as if he was in several places at the same time… even if he wasn't, the shadows themselves moved and flowed, turning tangible and deadly at times. Sadly, the manifested shadows could not compare with his titanic power, and were easily destroyed by Anvil without managing to even slow him down.

Anvil was stronger, faster, more resilient…

But not by much.

Sunny grinned as he felt it. Sure, he was inferior to the tyrannical Sovereign in terms of raw physical power, but the gap between them was not that vast — it was quite narrow, in fact. As if the true advantage the Supremes possessed lay mostly in their connection to their Domains, and since the Shadow Realm Fragment was suppressing that connection, Anvil was devoid of his usual strength.

And yet…

Despite being narrow, the gap seemed impossible to bridge.

'Damn it!'

Every single one of Sunny's strikes was either blocked, deflected, or calmly evaded. Every single movement, no matter how fast or forceful, was predicted and turned against him. Despite his ferocious power and titanic strength, Sunny was struggling with all his might, while Anvil remained seemingly unbothered.

Full of disdain, even.

"This style… did she teach you this style? It seems that the two of you had known each other for much longer than you let on."

Sunny gritted his teeth behind Weaver's Mask.

"She wasn't the one who taught me, and we don't know each other at all..."

Anvil smiled coldly.

"No matter."

Pushing Sunny's sword aside, he moved forward. Sunny fled into the shadows, but by the time he escaped them, Anvil's fist was still poised to strike him in the chest.

A terrifying blow sent a shockwave running through Sunny's body and threw him back. The breastplate of the Onyx Mantle cracked, only to mend itself a moment later — augmented by seven shadows, the [Living Stone] trait of his stonelike carapace had grown immensely potent.

Anvil looked at Sunny darkly, then shook his head.

"Not metal, but not stone either… an Underworld armament, then. Did you think it would save you?"

Sunny suppressed a groan, raising his sword to attack.

"I might have entertained such a thought, yes…"

Anvil possessed the ability to control metal, and that power was not limited to his own swords and armor. He could just as easily control the weapons of his enemies, as well — fortunately, Sunny's armor was made from the strange material that was closer to stone than to metal while inheriting traits of both. His weapons, meanwhile, were made from shadows.

Nephis wore no armor at all, and the Blessing was like a blade forged from furious flame. So, both of them were immune to Anvil's power.

That was not something Sunny had relied on to save him, though. It was just one of the measures he had to take to give himself a chance.

'But why is he so strong? It doesn't make sense!'

As Sunny attacked and Anvil defended, unbothered, almost as if entertaining himself, they moved across the shattered battlefield. Sunny lunged forward to deliver a deadly thrust, but Anvil simply moved out of the way. The two of them crashed into a crowd of puppets, and carried by momentum, Sunny tore through them like a beast made of pure darkness.

The bodies of the puppets were too fragile to offer any resistance to his dreadful might. As he arrested his forward momentum and turned on the ball of his foot, he saw clouds of crimson haze and tiny pieces of torn bodies spreading outward in the air slowly, as if suspended in water.

Before the first drop of blood even hit the ground, Sunny and Anvil had already exchanged a hundred more blows, moving away like a rolling disaster.

'I think... I can sense it.'

All this time, Sunny had been learning how Anvil fought through Shadow Dance. The Sovereign's battle art was deep and complicated... strange, even, impossible to fathom in a short amount of time. But now, he was starting to realize why the King of Swords seemed so unassailable despite not being that much stronger.

There, in the very essence of his battle art, being used as a weapon…

Was the Will.

And while the two of them fought, Sunny was learning how to wield the Will as a weapon, himself.

Chapter-2239: Vibrant Colors

The fractured battlefield quaked as Sunny landed on the white bone, instantly dashing away with a thunderclap. Surrounded by a billowing mantle of shadows, he was like a formless mass of darkness that moved around the formidable figure of the King of Swords, aiming to end the King's life.

His black sword was like an omen of death, and at any moment, his dark mantle could bloom with tendrils that shot forward at dire speed, turning into sharp blades, clawed hands, or rattling chains.

The blades aimed to pierce Anvil's armor, the inky-black hands tried to pull him down, and the chains tried to bind him.

However, instead, they shattered against the dark steel of his impenetrable armor, were cut down by his swords, and were torn to pieces by his ferocious strength.

'What a bastard.'

If the shadows Sunny manifested had been more effective against his Supreme enemy, he would have already encased himself in a Shadow Shell, bringing its immense might down upon Anvil. But for now, there was no point — the Shell would just offer a larger target to the King of Swords, and would be destroyed swiftly.

'It is… it is like…'

It was as if Sunny was stuck in a mire. That was what it felt like, to fight against an enemy who had long forged their Will into a deadly weapon — like the quiet horror of a person slowly drowning in cold mud, unable to claw their way out or find purchase.

That was because the world itself seemed to be on Anvil's side, bending to accommodate his Will. Sunny had not noticed it at first,

but once he recognized the wrongness, it was impossible to ignore it.

The effect was subtle, but unmistakable, turning the King's swords sharper while Sunny's weapons became duller, making the King's armor more durable while Sunny's armor became more fragile, helping the King strike true every time while Sunny always seemed to miss his target by a hair's breadth.

'The Will…'

Sunny possessed the Will, too, and wasn't completely unfamiliar with wielding it. He even tried to unleash it against Anvil's will, hoping to bend the world back into shape — not even to favor him, but simply to remain neutral. However, he felt like an infant trying to overpower an adult.

The distance between them was too vast.

He could sense it, too, what Anvil was doing… and yet, Sunny had no words and no concepts to describe or understand what he was sensing.

It was as if he was a blind person who had somehow managed to fathom what colors were, while Anvil could mix the colors to paint a vibrant, beautiful picture with his brush.

Sunny felt bad. Sunny felt indignant.

Why did he have to feel like he was drowning while experiencing his full power for the first time?

'Ah… it's driving me mad.'

The world was suddenly consumed by blinding radiance as Nephis unleashed a roaring torrent of white flame some distance away. Sunny could not spare any attention to observe her battle against the Queen, but he did catch glimpses of it from time to time.

Nephis had already assumed her Transcendent form, appearing like a spirit of light in the deep darkness of the Shadow Realm Fragment. Her pure radiance spread far and wide, illuminating the dark sea of puppets and the rustling storm of swords above…

Her beautiful figure was dwarfed by the gargantuan flesh golem, though, moving in the air as she dodged the devastating attacks of the Queen. From a distance, it looked like a human was chasing a shining firefly across a dark abyss — however, that firefly had a vicious bite, searing the eerie creature with blinding rays of incandescent light, each of them hundreds of meters in length.

The incandescent rays were soul flame channeled through the Blessing, condensed and shaped by its radiant blade. They cut and burned the flesh golem at the same time, perhaps even evaporating some of the river of blood that flowed with the hideous creature…

But then again, the Queen's vessel was not that hideous anymore. As she fought, it continued to change and shift, assuming a more human form. The towering being still looked like a monster born from a feverish nightmare, but it also possessed an eerie, chilling kind of grace now, moving across the fractured battlefield with a ferocious and merciless sense of purpose.

The wounds dealt to her by Neph's flame were erased in mere seconds, not leaving even a trace.

The other dead Titans had broken free by then, too. One had been torn apart by a particularly dreadful Great abomination, and another one was turned into a mountain of bleeding flesh by the flying swords… but the rest were already destroying Sunny's rabid army, killing and consuming the ancient predators of the abominable jungle in a variety of gruesome ways.

'We are all holding back.'

Even as his armor broke and repaired itself, as he was assaulting Anvil like a whirlwind of deadly darkness, Sunny knew that the four of them had not gone all out yet.

They were probing each other, for now, learning the ways of their enemy.

Sunny was benefiting from this short introduction the most, because Shadow Dance allowed him a unique insight into Anvil… into learning the way a Sovereign fought.

What a Sovereign was.

But it wasn't going to last much longer.

Because he could see it, already…

Anvil was growing bored.

Even though it wounded his pride and sent shivers running down his spine, Sunny saw that his enemy had only tolerated their battle in hopes of experiencing something amusing.

But his hope was slowly being crushed by the lack of challenge Sunny offered.

It was disheartening to see.

So… what was the point of holding back?

The bone plain shuddered as the head of an enormous serpent suddenly revealed itself above the vast chasm.

At the same time as it appeared, a tenebrous steed suddenly rose from the shadows behind Anvil, biting down with adamantine fangs, while a graceful knight in intricate onyx armor stepped out of the darkness in front of him, bringing down her black sword on his head.

Considering Anvil's power over metal, Sunny entrusted Fiend with another, equally important task — defending Rain against the abominable jungle. Saint and Nightmare, however, were enough to give Anvil pause.

And that pause was enough for Serpent to turn into a black odachi, landing into Sunny's hand a moment later.

He was learning to wield the Will from Anvil…

But that did not mean that he could not cheat.

[Slaying Blade] Ability Description: "When in its Soul Weapon form, Soul Serpent embodies the Death aspect of Shadow God. As such, it ignores the will of greater beings.

As his Shadows held the Sovereign in place, Sunny took a step forward and brought his odachi down in a downward slash, the power of his strike causing the air itself to part in a towering rift.

Chapter-2240: Flawless Blade

Sunny's sword parted the air, creating a wind blade dozens of meters tall. It slammed into the surface of the weathered bone with a thunderous roar, sending a cloud of debris flying up…

However, the wind blade was a mere side effect of the black odachi falling upon Anvil. Held in place by Nightmare and Saint, he had nowhere to escape — two of his seven swords bounced off Saint's shield, too, creating a breach in the sphere of rustling steel.

Sunny's sword plummeted into that breach, and for a moment, he allowed himself to believe that it would strike down a Sovereign.

No… not really.

Taught by countless bitter experiences, Sunny knew that victory never came so easy.

And indeed, against all reason, Anvil managed to survive.

At the last moment, he shook off Nightmare, sent Saint staggering back, and turned his torso.

As a result, the black odachi failed to end his life…

It did, however, bite into his breastplate.

Anvil's dark armor seemed impregnable before, but this time, it was actually breached. The glancing blow did not penetrate deep, but Sunny felt it cutting flesh.

As his sword scraped against the surface of the ancient bone, a drop of blood fell off its serpentine blade.

Anvil took a few steps back and looked down, at the long cut on his armor. A moment later, the black metal repaired itself — but the

shallow laceration beneath remained.

Looking up, he studied Sunny for a few moments, then smiled coldly.

"You actually made me bleed. No one else has managed in a decade."

Sunny smiled behind Weaver's Mask, hiding his discomfort.

"Bleeding? Bah. How pedestrian."

The King of Swords chuckled.

"That sword of yours is curious, too. Soul serpents are supposed to have gone extinct thousands of years ago, and yet here it is… the last survivor of its species. I wonder how the Nightmare Spell preserved it."

Sunny, Saint, and Nightmare surrounded Anvil from three sides, but he did not seem concerned. Instead, he looked… almost elated.

"You are not as big of a disappointment as I thought."

His cold voice turned darker then, sending a chill running down Sunny's spine.

"You still have to die, though."

Sunny smiled darkly.

"Oh? Why, pray tell?"

Dismissing three of his six swords so that only three remained, Anvil lingered for a few moments, then said evenly:

"Because you are a threat to my greatest masterpiece, of course."

With that, something changed subtly about the world.

In the next moment, Sunny gasped.

Two of Anvil's swords shot at Saint and Nightmare, while the Sovereign himself was suddenly near Sunny. His cursed blade lashed out, bypassing the black odachi and piercing the Onyx Mantle.

A flash of pain washed over Sunny's right arm.

Anvil avoided his counterattack with chilling ease and looked at him coldly.

"I spent decades forging that sword, you know…"

Sunny dove into the shadows, but Anvil's sword reached him in their dark embrace, as well, gifting him another wave of blinding pain.

Rolling out of the shadows, Sunny staggered to his feet and raised his odachi in a desperate attempt to defend himself.

"Crazy bastard… you are not talking about Nephis, are you?"

The corner of Anvil's mouth moved slightly.

"Who else? I will admit, I was late to realize her potential… but after she returned from the Second Nightmare alive, I saw it clearly. It was like a revelation. Everything fell into place, and I knew what I had been waiting for all these years."

Sunny was suddenly overcome by an insatiable desire to rip that man apart. He had only been aiming to kill Anvil before — but now, he wanted to kill him slowly, and viscerally, with his bare hands.

But Anvil did not give Sunny a chance to bask in that fury, battering Serpent aside and leaving a deep cut on his left shoulder. The cursed blade scraped against the bone, making Sunny growl in pain.

"In hindsight, it was me who had tempered her into the flawless blade that she became. From a lost little girl to the radiant star she is now… it was me who had shaped her, sharpened her, guided her. It was me who had forged Changing Star into what she is today."

Sunny was too appalled to process every word Anvil was speaking, so he simply tried to stop the next blow. However, Anvil simply crushed his block, leaving a deep gouge on his right thigh.

"And now, finally… the perfect sword I forged is close to being complete. It is just that you, disgusting thing, are blemishing its blade. But that is alright. A small stain can be easily removed."

Sunny let out a stifled scream as Anvil's blade bit into his side.

And at the same time, he realized something important…

'He's completely insane.'

The King of Swords had always been reserved and taciturn, so it was hard to see. But his severe and cold personality went beyond simple strangeness — what hid behind it was true, utter madness. Sunny did not know if it was the result of becoming Supreme or simply Anvil's own mental disfigurement, but his enemy was far removed from sanity.

Sunny also understood something else — it was that Anvil truly did not care about anything, including winning this battle. All he cared about was creating a flawless sword... or a flawless being that was no different from a sword, it seemed.

So, in a perverse way, he even hoped to lose.

Because after failing to forge his own children into perfect weapons, he had fixated on Nephis, the daughter of Smile of Heaven, as his best and last hope of creating a flawless… sword.

He had said that Nephis was almost complete, which meant that she had not proven herself flawless yet — there was one last act that remained for her to achieve completion, in his twisted mind.

The act of killing him, no doubt.

'He's completely insane and suicidal.'

And all of it was the result of Anvil's debilitating Flaw. A chilling, but reasonable conclusion of his ruthless pursuit to rid himself of all attachments.

A lot of things that seemed odd before suddenly made sense.

Sunny groaned mentally.

'That's great, but…'

Sadly enough, Sunny himself was not part of Anvil's plan to give Nephis one last, deadly trial — whether she could prove herself worthy and survive or not. In fact, as far as the King of Swords was concerned, Sunny stood in his way.

Marring the pure beauty of the nearly flawless blade with his vile presence.

So, Sunny had to be purged.

Staggering back, he forced out a pale smile.

"Your Majesty, King Anvil… I want to say something. You are clearly, definitely not a complete damn lunatic…"

Chapter-2241: Fleeting Star

After listening to Anvil reveal the depths of his madness, something inside Sunny switched… or maybe snapped. He was not sure.

There was a line that could not be crossed, and hearing the King of Swords boast about brutalizing an innocent child… Nephis… as if it was some kind of crowning achievement had crossed the line for Sunny.

A storm of emotions raging in his heart settled, and a swarm of thoughts weighing on his mind was quelled. All that remained was a cool, silent darkness of uncompromising killing intent.

Before, Sunny had been worried about how to kill Anvil and survive.

Now, he only cared about killing him…

No, caring was not the right word. It suggested the possibility of a different outcome, but Sunny knew without a shadow of doubt that his enemy would die… it was an axiom, a self-evident truth. All he had to do now was shape the world to fit that truth.

That was something he could handle.

Sunny was the most honest man in two worlds, after all.

His body was wounded and pulsing with pain, and his enemy was superior to him… his enemy was Supreme. But it did not matter.

'Life is just the prelude to death…'

As two of Anvil's dreadful swords forced Saint and Nightmare back and the Sovereign himself descended upon Sunny, he allowed the cursed blade to pierce his armor and sink into his flesh. The pain was exquisite.

Grabbing Anvil's wrist, Sunny smiled behind Weaver's Mask.

'...and war is just the key to open its gates. Got you, bastard.'

When he spoke, his voice sounded sinister and full of malice:

"Do you feel at home on this battlefield, heir of War? Well, allow me to invite you into my world then."

With that, he strengthened his grasp…

And pulled Anvil into the shadows.

***

Some distance away, Nephis was locked in a dire battle against the Queen. The titanic flesh golem pursued her with eerie grace and bestial fury, and all she could do was flee, retreating further and further while lashing out against the monstrous creature with searing rays of pure white flame.

The Blessing was complimenting her Aspect flawlessly.

Now that she had assumed the form of the radiant spirit, her bound sword seemed to be forged from pure light as well. Just like Nephis herself was augmented by the titanic power of her soul flame, its incandescent blade was augmented by the white flames too… in fact, it benefited from their ferocious power even more due to the [Flame Conduit] trait.

The very same trait allowed Nephis to channel her fire through the blessed blade, condensing it into incinerating rays that span hundreds of meters in length. That was how she was able to contend against the towering flesh golem despite being much smaller, and that was how she had managed to deal it grievous wounds.

Sadly, those wounds simply healed a few moments after being dealt. The scorched flesh was discarded, and the cut tissue was repaired. The Queen never slowed down, never faltered, and never let up her fearsome assault.

Nephis raised her sword once more.

Her world was stark and pure, devoid of all distractions. There was only her and her enemy… everything else was washed away by pain.

The harrowing agony of her Flaw was familiar, but the pain of having her body and soul ravaged by the talons of the flesh golem was new.

Nephis was able to move incredibly swiftly in the radiant spirit form, soaring through the carnage of swords as she circled the Queen and evaded her obliterating attacks — but she had not managed to evade all of them. Usually, she would have been able to heal any wound dealt to her, and this partial Transcendent form of hers was more or less immune to physical attacks, anyway…

However, every time the Queen managed to strike Nephis, there were gruesome marks left on her body and on her soul… on her very spirit, perhaps. As if she was being cut not simply by the Queen's talons, but also by her Will.

'It hurts…'

But pain was just pain.

More importantly, Nephis was overcome by suffocating wrath because of how powerless she was in the face of Ki Song. Nothing she did dealt any lasting damage to the eerie flesh golem, while the marks left on her by Ki Song were refusing to heal.

She was losing.

Some distance away, Sunny seemed to be slowly succumbing under the steel storm unleashed by Anvil, too. Further still, the two great armies were slowly melting in the flood of abominations — the snow still swirled in the fissures of the ancient bone, but the Shadow that had summoned it was already gone, having turned into a serpentine sword. The jungle was yet to recover, but it would shake off the frigid frost soon.

The Great Nightmare Creatures that had escaped from the Nameless Temple were dying.

Time was running out for Neph's defiant rebellion — and for the great armies as well, perhaps.

She could feel it, even through the pain…

The flames of their hope, which burned brighter and brighter still the deeper countless soldiers fell into the dark, dreadful abyss of despair.

'There is no point in holding back anymore.'

Nephis poured her flames into the Blessing once again and swung her incandescent sword, unleashing a blinding jet of condensed flame from its blade. The white ray stretched high into the dark sky and then fell, leaving a deep wound on the Queen's titanic body.

Using the momentary lull in the barrage of attacks, Nephis dashed away, flying high above the fractured battlefield.

She had almost reached the edge of the massive chasm that had been caused by the Ivory Island's fall when the Queen caught her. Nephis twisted and summoned a devastating explosion, using the shockwave to slow down the flesh golem's attack — however, its enormous hand still reached her, the sharp talons tearing her flaming body apart.

A flower of white flame blossomed in the dark sky as fire leaked from her gruesome wounds like blood.

Suppressing a scream, Nephis forcefully contained the fire and coalesced her torn form back into its previous shape, then used her momentum to circle around the Queen. Before the flesh golem could turn, she delivered another cut — this one aimed at the ankle of the titanic creature.

'Fall!'

The ray of light sliced cleanly through the Queen's leg. The wound would heal itself moments later, no doubt, but for the moment, the flesh golem had lost its balance.

And as Nephis dashed forward, using herself as the epicenter of a violent explosion, another shockwave slammed into the titanic creature…

Sending it stumbling over the edge of the chasm, into the billowing white veil of swirling snow.

As the Queen plummeted into the depths of the Hollows, Nephis hovered above the chasm, shining like a radiant star in the boundless darkness of the vast starless sky.

Then, she aimed the blade of the Blessing down…

And ignited her soul.

Chapter-2242: Shining Depths

As Nephis felt the indescribable agony of her soul cores shattering and the ocean of flame contained within them escaping like an incinerating white inferno, she opened her mouth to scream.

However, what escaped it was not a scream, but a thunderous melody of True Names being evoked by a Shaper to bend the world to her will.

The True Name of Fire, the True Name of Destruction…

Her own True Name, as well. The name of Changing Star, the Star of Ruin.

And the name of the Queen.

Ravensong.

A brilliant star suddenly ignited in the dark sky above the snowy chasm.

It was so bright and pure that even the soldiers in the distance could not help but turn their heads and look, her light reflecting in their frightened eyes.

Then, a pillar of flame escaped the blade of the Blessing and plummeted into the vast expanse of swirling snow, burning a hole in it. The snow melted into water, the water evaporated, and the steam was overheated, turning into plasma. The air itself was burned away, creating an area of absolute vacuum.

All of it happened in an instant.

Then, the pillar of flame disappeared, extinguished by the darkness, and for a moment, everything was still.

And then…

It was as if a sun was born under the fractured battlefield.

Suddenly, the billowing cloud of snow veiling the depths of the vast chasm shone with beautiful white light. The same soft light rose from the countless jagged cracks that marred the surface of the shattered bone plain, chasing away the darkness.

The Hollows became a source of pure radiance. It was as if the dark depths of Godgrave had somehow switched places with its blinding sky, with light pouring from below and darkness looming far above.

Everything was still for a brief moment… and in that moment, the soft radiance pouring from the cracks in the ancient bone gradually turned more intense, and then more intense still, until it was almost violently bright.

The world shuddered.

A terrifying roar rose into the sky, making the Awakened soldiers stumble and press their hands against their ears. The Nightmare Creatures faltered. The swirling snow was instantly obliterated, and towering walls of white flame shot from the jagged cracks into the black sky.

The bone itself was blackened, entire swaths of it plummeting into the white inferno below.

The abominable jungle, which had been frozen by the lethal snowstorm, was now set aflame and turned to ash. The great vertical bridges of twisting vines all collapsed into whirlwinds of embers, and countless Nightmare Creatures perished in the explosion, either annihilated by the obliterating shockwave or burned to death by ferocious flames.

By the time the world stopped quaking, the Hollows were a radiant hell of white fire and incandescent embers. The snow was replaced by swirling ash, which rained down from above. Smoke veiled everything in sight.

…And from that smoke, something rose, stretching its tendrils toward

a small, radiant star burning in the black sky.

***

Sunny had carried a Corrupted Titan through the shadows once. The weight of its vile soul had been both crushing and immense…

But the weight of Anvil's soul was simply unbearable. Or rather, his soul seemed immovable.

And yet, Sunny did move it.

In that moment — for a moment — his will trumped that of a Supreme, perhaps because he had caught the King of Swords by surprise.

As the two of them submerged into the embrace of shadows, though, Sunny did something that he had never done before, and had never been capable of doing before.

Instead of stepping through the shadows while carrying another living being to emerge from them someplace else, he simply pulled both Anvil and himself into the familiar cold darkness.

There, in the world of darkness, both of them were nothing more than intangible shadows themselves, their souls laid bare.

And Sunny was quite familiar with battling other shadows in that lightless realm.

…He was in for an unpleasant surprise, though.

Shadows were usually shapeless and formless — unless they were guided by a conscious mind that shaped them into a particular form. It had taken him quite a while to learn how to shape himself into a form capable of battle, long before…

But Anvil was not formless.

His shadow was vast and terrifying, as deep as Sunny's own. What's more, it had maintained the very same form he wore in the tangible world, as if Anvil's sense of self was so absolute that nothing could

change it.

Out there in the world of lightless shapelessness, Sunny saw color for the first time in his life.

There was a colossal figure of an armor-clad warrior in front of him, entirely black, wielding an impenetrably black sword. A vermilion cloak rested on his shoulders, and scarlet flames were burning in his eyes.

Still…

This was the land of shadows.

And Sunny was their Lord.

As his own shadow turned into a towering giant with six hands, he rushed at Anvil and clawed at his colossal form. Whatever armor the King of Swords wore must have granted him a great degree of protection against soul attacks, and yet, it parted in front of Sunny's claws like paper.

For the first time since their battle started, he felt that his enemy was truly hurt.

Anvil only wasted a split second to orient himself in the unfamiliar world of shadows… almost as if he had experienced fighting someone wielding power over shadows once, already… and coldly pushed his dreadful sword forward.

The harrowing blade cut into Sunny's vast form, threatening to cut it in half.

Anyone else would have probably been destroyed by that single attack, their souls collapsing like tattered cloth. But as soon as the black blade touched Sunny, an intricate weave of golden strings flashed for a moment in the dark depths of his giant form, almost like chainmail.

That was Soul Weave, of course, which held his soul together and reinforced it against soul attacks.

The pain was blinding, of course.

Anvil's sword had been slowed by Soul Weave, preventing it from cutting Sunny in two, but it did not stop the cursed blade altogether — but in the next moment, his towering form simply parted in front of the sharp edge, allowing it to pass through him without dealing any damage whatsoever.

He was not obliged to maintain the same form, after all. In fact, the very concept of shape was merely a crutch here in the embrace of shadows.

The six-armed giant collapsed, turning into a formless mass that enveloped Anvil like a shroud. Countless clawed hands protruded from its surface, and countless fanged maws opened on it, ripping the Sovereign's soul to shreds.

Anvil did not allow Sunny to attack him unpunished, of course. Just as Sunny was tearing him with claws and fangs, Anvil continued to stab and slice him with his sword…

'Ah… argh… haaa!'

Sunny wailed and laughed in dark glee as the two of them plummeted through the darkness, destroying each other.

'No one else managed to make you bleed in a decade, huh? How about now?! Are you still amused, you wretched bastard?!'

Anvil's soul might have been far more potent, it might have been empowered by his vast Domain…

But he did not have Soul Weave, and therefore, the very structure of his soul was different.

It was far more fragile, and far easier to destroy.

'Let's see which one of us will last longer, King of Swords...'

Chapter-2243: Embers and Ash

Nephis dissolved into pain for a few brief moments…

Each moment lasted an eternity.

The agony of her soul cores being torn apart was unfathomable. Knowing that she had only one chance, she did not hold back and went further than she had ever gone before, destroying not one, but six of them at the same time to fuel her fire.

As a boundless ocean of furious flame that had been contained within her soul broke free with a deafening roar, she struggled with all her being to channel it instead of being consumed by it.

She willed it into submission.

The incandescent ray of white radiance fell into the billowing snow, and her shattered soul burned, mutilated, both enveloped in brilliant flame and on the verge of being extinguished. Humans were not meant to possess more than one soul core, but even if someone did, losing six of them would have instantly and utterly obliterated them…

But Neph's soul was special.

The web of cracks running through the fractured battlefield ignited with soft white radiance, illuminated from below.

The explosion was simply too devastating, causing not only the shattered bone plain, but all of Godgrave to quake. It was dozens of times more powerful than the explosion that had destroyed Twilight, and far more powerful than even the terrible conflagration she summoned to destroy the First Seeker.

Nephis had been merely a Master back then, after all. She was a

Transcendent now, and so, the soul she was burning to fuel the flame was Transcendent as well.

That was why Nephis had pushed Ki Song into the chasm. Had she caused the explosion on the surface and not in the Hollows, the resulting shockwave would have annihilated both great armies.

Instead, it was the ancient jungle that burned.

The Nightmare Creatures there — those who had been powerful enough to survive the lethal snowstorm — were wounded and weakened…

They had been powerful enough to survive the snow, but they did not survive the flame.

And as they died, a furious torrent of soul fragments poured into Neph's crumbling soul, mending it.

She screamed as new soul cores were formed to replace the old ones.

The damage dealt to her soul was too grievous, though, and she was still being ravaged by the Queen's power. So, these cores shattered as well, and new ones were formed in their place.

Nephis felt like she was dying and being remade from the flames in an endless, harrowing cycle of rebirth. She lost herself in the disorienting torment of it all, feeling something inside of her being melted and fused by the immolating heat.

Below her, the charred remains of the ancient jungle were like an incandescent hell. Black smoke veiled the vast chasm, glowing with angry white light. It seemed like nothing could have survived down there… surely, Ki Song would have perished…

But even as Nephis felt that brittle hope, she knew that she had failed.

Because the Spell had never whispered into her ear, announcing the death of the Queen.

So, when colossal tendrils of smoke rose to catch her, Nephis was not

surprised. Just… resentful.

Still reeling and overcome by agony, she dodged and fell from the sky, landing on the surface of the ancient bone gracelessly. The winds howled, blowing the smoke away, and immense streams of blood were revealed below it, twisting as they coalesced into a vast crimson river and dove down.

Nephis groaned.

The Queen's titanic vessel had been destroyed, at least.

A melodious laughter resounded above the fractured bone plain, making the brilliant radiance of Neph's spirit form dim a little.

"Stunning… truly, little Nephis. You are so stunning. It is such a shame…"

Nephis smiled bitterly.

'...She's hurt.'

It seemed like Ki Song was unscathed, but it had not escaped Neph's notice that countless puppets had turned to ash… and that the great river of blood stayed at a distance instead of drowning her. The Queen was definitely hurt by the explosion.

Of course, she had not been hurt nearly as terribly as Nephis was.

As if to echo her somber thoughts, the Queen's voice resounded once again, turning cold and ominous:

"Sadly… it's time we end this charade. I'll still have to deal with Anvil after I am done with you, Changing Star — and it needs to happen swiftly, lest too many of my people die."

Nephis pushed away the pain and straightened, looking at the glistening river of blood with somber resignation.

"Don't pretend like you care."

She had revealed her ace and accomplished nothing. So, the Queen

would abandon caution and unleash her full power now, too — after all, she knew what her enemy was capable of already.

How terrible could it be?

As Nephis watched, fury burning in her heart, the river of blood rippled.

And then, something eerie happened, making her take a step back.

The remaining Titan puppets — all of them, including those that had been brought down by the prisoners of the Nameless Temple and the storm of swords — all followed the fate of the first, decaying into a flood of appalling, viscous crimson liquid.

It flowed across the bone plain like a tide, and then formed a new vessel around the great river of blood.

If Neph's partial Transformation possessed human eyes, they would have widened now, betraying a hint of stunned disbelief.

A new, terrifying flesh golem slowly rose above the bone plain, easily dwarfing the previous one in size. The creature Nephis had fought was titanic, but this one… this one was simply colossal, towering above the fractured battlefield like a red mountain. It was at least a kilometer high, looking down at Nephis with an eerie, eyeless face.

Nephis had been like a fly in front of the first of the Queen's vessels… in front of this one, she was like a speck of dust.

How could a speck of dust defeat a mountain?

Her radiant figure rose into the air, burning with blinding light.

Chapter-2244: Seventh Strike

Deep in the embrace of shadows, Sunny was being cut apart as he was tearing Anvil apart. The two of them were destroying each other, both indifferent to the harrowing pain of their souls coming undone.

However, the indifference of one was different from the other.

Anvil did not care about anything, while Sunny cared about killing him too much to be bothered by the pain.

'Die, die…'

He would have laughed if he had a mouth capable of laughing, but while his formless shape possessed a hundred maws, all of them were mute.

There was no sound in the world of shadows, only silence.

'Die!'

He shredded Anvil's armor and mangled his soul, drowning in agony and dark glee… but as much as Sunny abandoned himself to the fervor of battle, his mind remained cold and calm like a still lake.

Even as the King's sword cut him, he was calmly calculating how to kill the King of Swords.

Sunny had a hint of suspicion that Anvil had rambled about forging Nephis into a flawless blade for a reason. It was most likely a true glimpse into his twisted thoughts, but at the same time, Sunny would not put it past the insidious Sovereign to have said it aloud in order to undermine his composure.

If so, it had backfired spectacularly…

But even then, the more Sunny calculated the odds, the colder he felt.

Because he saw no possibility of winning.

Anvil… was simply too tyrannical, his Will too sharp of a weapon.

Even as his soul was being torn, Anvil was growing more accustomed to fighting in the world of shadows. And as they plummeted deeper and deeper into the lightless expanse of the Shadow Realm Fragment, angry red runes ignited on his black armor, causing the shadows to ripple and part.

Anvil opened his mouth, and against all laws, the silence of the lightless abyss was broken by a sound.

"Enough."

Grasping Sunny's shapeless form with one hand, he raised his sword and brought it down…

Cutting the very shadows with its blade.

In the next moment, Sunny was violently thrown back into the material world.

He rolled on the splintered bone, groaning as his battered body hit the ground. By the time he rose to his feet, Anvil was already stepping out of the severed shadows.

His armor was whole, and his vermilion cloak moved languidly in the wind.

Even though Sunny knew that his enemy's soul received grievous wounds, outwardly, Anvil looked utterly unscathed.

'Ah… that rotten bastard…'

The battlefield had changed while they were struggling in the shadows. The fractured battlefield was crumbling, smoke and an angry white glow rising from the jagged cracks on its surface. The Hollows below were a sea of embers and fire. Far away…

'What… the hell is that?'

A colossal figure towered above the bone plain, its vaguely feminine shape both harrowing and eerily beautiful.

A flash of white radiance illuminated the towering creature, and that was all Sunny had time to see, since Anvil's sword whistled past his neck.

He would have been beheaded if he had reacted a split second later.

Sunny reeled back and deflected the next blow with his odachi, grimacing under Weaver's Mask as his tattered soul pulsed with pain.

Anvil smiled coldly.

"Your world, huh? What a dreary place…"

He was suddenly just a step away, batting Sunny's sword to the side. In the next moment, Anvil kicked him with devastating force, sending Sunny flying dozens of meters back.

He crashed onto the surface of the bone, bounced like a pebble, and slid dozens of meters more.

Sunny jumped to his feet almost instantly, but by the time he regained his balance, Anvil was already upon him.

The dreadful sword cut the air.

"I should commend you, though… such spirit! I am actually in pain."

Sunny dodged and tried to deliver a blow of his own, but Anvil dodged it with an easy step and spoke evenly, a chilling threat hiding in his cold voice:

"...What shall we do about that?"

'Why are you talking so much?'

Sunny laughed.

"I heard dying is a good cure for pain, King of Swords. Let's do that."

Anvil smiled darkly.

"Still insolent, I see…"

With that, his sword lashed out, suddenly encompassing the whole world.

This time, Sunny could not escape.

The cursed sword seemed to pierce his very essence, cutting his courage apart.

Suddenly, Sunny felt terror grasping his heart.

The next strike cut his determination, and Sunny staggered, suddenly unsure of why he was still resisting the inevitable.

The third strike cut his hope, and in that moment, Sunny knew that he stood no chance. What was he thinking about? A mere Saint could not defeat a Sovereign. It was impossible.

Serpent suddenly felt heavy and unwieldy in his hands, and his pain — both physical and mental — became overwhelming.

He groaned.

The fourth strike cut his killing intent…

Or rather, tried to.

Instead, the cursed blade came to a screeching halt and bounced back, failing to destroy its target.

Full of terror, hesitation, and hopelessness, Sunny took an unsteady step and looked up at the towering figure of the King. His hands trembled.

…And yet, he forced himself to smile despite the dread, doubt, and despair that had conquered his heart.

'I'll kill him... I must kill him… I must...'

His shaking voice escaped from behind the fearsome mask:

"Are you ready to die?"

Was he ready?

Anvil shook his head.

"How stubborn."

The fifth strike cut space itself.

'What…'

The space was suddenly warped. It seemed like even Anvil could not destroy the Shadow Realm Fragment, but being the inventive craftsman that he was, he found a way to displace a part of it.

There was darkness behind them, and there was darkness in front of them… but in the space where Sunny and Anvil stood, the harsh radiance of the overcast sky poured from above, and the familiar heat enveloped them like a suffocating veil.

Sunny was blinded by the light.

He was also robbed of the power that had been bestowed upon him by the Shadow Realm Fragment, and lost connection to the source element that nourished him.

The sixth strike was quite mundane, piercing his abdomen and throwing Sunny to his knees.

Pulling his sword back, Anvil looked down at him with a cold expression and said in an indifferent tone...

"Rest in peace, Lord of Shadows."

The cursed blade fell down.

Chapter-2245: Counsel of Despair

The cursed sword fell down, its inescapable blade shining in the blinding light. Sunny was kneeling in front of Anvil, looking up — his black mask was baring its fangs in a fearsome snarl, but beneath it, he was pale and terrified.

In his eyes, the thin edge of Anvil's sword seemed as vast as the sky, obscuring the whole world. He was gruesomely wounded and weak, his hands trembling, fear consuming his dazed mind.

He could not move, he could not breathe.

There was no escape.

…There was no point in trying to escape, anyway.

He was defeated, and so, all he could do was surrender. He wanted to surrender.

'Ah…'

Had he not struggled enough? Every step he had taken was an arduous struggle. Every battle he had won was a torturous trial. He was tired, terrified, and in pain — just like he had always been.

It had all been so hard, so painful. So lonesome. He was erased from the world and forgotten by everyone...

He was lost.

There was no salvation from Anvil's blade, but the blade itself offered salvation. A sad and somber kind of salvation, but salvation nonetheless — an end to all his pain and all his fear... as well as

everything else.

Sunny had no hope left.

'Let's… let's give up, Sunny.'

He looked at the falling sword meekly, ready to accept his end.

And then, he raised his hand and caught the cursed blade, stopping it a short distance away from his neck.

Sunny's hand trembled. The sword trembled as well, and as Anvil pushed it down, the steel blade easily cut the onyx gauntlet, mangling the flesh beneath and becoming smeared in blood. The sharp tip drew closer to Sunny's throat, but it still failed to pierce it… for now.

The two of them wrestled for control of the sword. Anvil was pushing it forward with his physical might and Aspect powers, while Sunny fought to hold it in place with all his strength, desperation, and sheer unwillingness to give up.

Giving up…

Sounded wonderful.

But there was one problem — if he gave up, he would not be able to kill Anvil.

And that was not something Sunny was willing to compromise on.

The cursed sword traveled a bit more, and a bit more of its length became painted by Sunny's blood. It was mere centimeters away from his throat now.

'Not good…'

Pale as a ghost, Sunny gritted his teeth behind Weaver's Mask and looked at Anvil with murderous darkness burning in his eyes.

He had not saved himself from death, really — he had merely postponed it, and not by long at that. He was managing to hold the

cursed sword back for now, but Anvil would overpower him soon. The smallest of actions would break his concentration and allow the sword to plunge into his neck, as well.

So… what was Sunny supposed to do?

'Think, think…'

He could sense Anvil's shadow. He could feel Anvil's tyrannical will giving shape to his killing intent and empowering the fatal inevitability of his sword.

Summoning death upon Sunny.

The will, the sword — what came first? What was the true weapon? No… was there even a distinction between the two? Or were they inseparable?

Were they one and the same?

As Sunny drowned in powerlessness and pain, as he was being consumed by a singular and overwhelming desire… a hint of a vague understanding suddenly dawned upon him.

His eyes narrowed slowly.

***

Far away, Nephis was hopelessly outmatched in the battle against the colossal vessel of the Queen. The titanic creature was too vast to be hurt by her flames — the burns they left on its flesh were too small to deal any lasting damage, and the cuts were too shallow to do any real harm. Even these shallow cuts healed in mere moments, leaving no trace behind.

At the same time, she was deeply infected by the Queen's power. Nephis could heal herself, while Ki Song could aggravate any wound — their powers had been locked in a stalemate before, but by now, Nephis was too outmatched, too grievously injured, and so her soul continued to rot and crumble a little faster than it was being cleansed and repaired.

Her suffering was unbearable…

And her defeat was inevitable.

Deep in her heart, Nephis knew that she could not survive. It was impossible.

She was thinking of assuming her full Transcendent form, but there was no point. Even if Nephis unleashed herself, she would not be able to harm the colossal vessel terribly enough to destroy it… and it was dangerous for her, as well.

There was a reason why Nephis only ever used her partial Transformation, and it was that she was afraid of losing herself forever in the furious flames of her true form… of never being able to become human again.

She would have still done it, of course, if she saw that there was a chance. If that could have helped her survive.

'Ah!'

The colossal creature moved irrationally fast for its prodigious size. There was both something regal and something bestial about her ferocious onslaught — the Queen's titanic hand reached toward Nephis, creating a hurricane with the pressure of its passing. Nephis evaded the immense talons, this time, but she could not avoid them forever.

Sooner or later, she would be caught, crushed, and extinguished.

There was nowhere for her escape. All she could do was fall.

'No.'

No… she refused.

Her soul continued to crumble and mend itself, continued to rot and be cleansed by the searing flames. Nephis wanted to scream, but she had no voice. Her vision was turning blurry.

Far away, the Lord of Shadows was pierced by Anvil's sword and fell

to his knees. The King raised his cursed blade, ready to strike down.

'No!'

The great armies were drowning in the flood of abominations. Her soldiers were dying, the flames of their brittle hopes disappearing in the sea of encroaching darkness. They longed to survive, but were met with the cold embrace of death instead.

'No…'

Overcome by pain, Nephis felt ready to succumb to despair.

…It was then that her radiant gaze turned to the dark sky.

She hesitated for a moment, and then her figure blazed with blinding radiance.

Abandoning her futile attempts to wound the Queen, Nephis flew up.

Up and up… up past the towering figure of the Queen's vessel, into the darkness of the rustling swords.

And beyond it.

Rising high above the battlefield, Nephis left the veil of shadows and escaped into the brilliant light of the cruel sky. The eternal veil of radiant clouds was just above her…

Spreading her wings, Nephis continued to rise.

The clouds welcomed her like a lost daughter.

Chapter-2246: Children of War

Far below, on the ground, Sunny was slowly losing the struggle against Anvil. The tip of the bloodied sword was already pressed against his neck, piercing the skin.

The blood was slowly flowing up the blade, trying to return to its source… however, his trembling hand was too mangled to contain it. His grip was still crushing, though, preventing the cursed sword from moving any further.

In that moment, tormented by desperation and pain, Sunny suddenly saw it clearly… the Will, and the way the King of Swords wielded it.

The vague shape of the path to Supremacy.

Disjointed pieces of knowledge and the things he had observed all came together, falling into place.

And suddenly, it all made sense.

His eyes narrowed.

It all made sense, but Sunny still did not know what he had to do. What he gained was not a map, but rather all the necessary tools he needed to draw the map — and then chart a course to his destinations across it.

If only he had time…

But there was no time.

He was going to be killed in mere seconds.

Sunny gritted his teeth, desperate and refusing to give up.

'No, no, no…'

And just then, a miracle happened.

Far above, the clouds of Godgrave parted, and rays of annihilating light poured down from the white abyss of the incandescent sky. The Fragment of the Shadow Realm endured them with cold indifference, remaining as dark and lightless as it had always been.

But Sunny and Anvil were currently devoid of its protection.

Sensing the clouds breaking above them, the King of Swords looked down at Sunny with cold contempt and pushed his sword forward with tyrannical force. He must have hoped to finish the job before the light reached them, but Sunny refused to be killed. The sword did not move.

However…

The annihilating light did not reach them, either.

High in the sky, the storm of rustling swords shifted, and both of them were suddenly drowned in shadows. Shifting his gaze up, Sunny saw the flying swords forming a vast, impenetrable shield above them — the enchanted blades were pressed tightly against each other, so that no gap was left between them, and therefore, no light reached the ground below.

Of course, the sky of Godgrave was not forgiving enough to be stopped by a barrier of mere steel, enchanted or not.

Already, there were isles of angry red glow spreading across the surface of the celestial shield. Glowing drops fell down, and soon, molten metal rained from the sky.

The swords were being annihilated, but there were so many of them that, for now, the barrier held.

It was not going to last long, though.

Sunny lowered his gaze and looked at Anvil, feeling the cursed blade scrape against the bones of his hand and sink deeper into his neck.

He was drawing the map feverishly.

…And then, he saw it.

He finally understood how to attain Supremacy.

***

Far above, Nephis was drifting in the harrowing white abyss of the godless sky.

There was no wind here, no hope, and no salvation. Only silence and blinding radiance that went beyond fire, beyond light, beyond heat. That radiance was destruction incarnate… it was destruction itself, a force from before time existed that was capable of erasing entire worlds from existence. Of erasing existence itself.

Nephis was burning.

Her body was made of flame, but even that flame was being destroyed.

Her soul was turning to ash, and the ashes of her soul were turning into nothingness.

There, in that merciless white abyss…

Nephis lost her body, her mind, her soul. Her very self was stripped bare and cleansed of everything, until nothing but her naked spirit remained.

Her spirit began to crumble, as well.

But she still had the will. Her will had been born from pain, from flame, from conviction…

From longing.

And so, she willed herself into existence.

She willed herself to be reborn from the fire, to be blessed by the fire.

She spoke the True Name of destruction, warding herself from being destroyed.

Even as Nephis burned, she healed herself, and burned again…

Maintaining a tenuous state of equilibrium, neither dead nor alive, she continued to exist — for now. She knew that she would not be able to prevent herself from dissolving into white radiance with her sheer will for long. Her will was not inexhaustible, after all.

It was not absolute.

But in that moment between life and death, Nephis finally saw the path to Supremacy.

She knew what she had to do, and what her will had to become.

'I have to survive!'

***

'I have to die.'

That was his answer.

It was so simple, but Sunny had remained blind to it for so long.

Anvil's blade sank deeper into his neck. Molten metal rained from the sky, and far above, the barrier of swords was falling apart. Rays of light were already falling on the surface of the ancient bone.

Sunny had to die, but he could not allow himself to be killed. There was a trick to it all — at least there was for him.

He was going to cheat his way to Supremacy. That was his act of defiance.

Still, death was cruel and terrifying, even for someone who had died as many times as Sunny had. He had cheated death on plenty of occasions, always finding a way to stay alive…

But this time was different. It had to be.

This time, he had to die in earnest, with no deception or trickery involved... only truth.

It was so absurd that he wanted to laugh… he would have, if not for the few centimeters of cold steel currently piercing his neck.

Still, Sunny smiled crookedly behind Weaver's Mask.

He opened his mouth and asked in a hoarse voice, straining to make himself heard:

"Hey, King of Swords… do you wish to kill me?"

Anvil looked at him coldly.

"I do. I will."

Sunny couldn't help it, after all, and let out a stifled, sinister laugh.

The cursed blade cut him, and he grimaced.

A dark, murderous fury rose like a pyre in his heart.

Sunny spat:

"Listen, you wretch… you can't kill me. You are not worthy enough to kill me."

He mustered what little remained of his strength, arduously pushing Anvil's sword a few centimeters back for a moment.

"A man worthy of killing me has not been born in this world, yet."

Kneeling, bleeding, utterly broken, Sunny looked up at Anvil and laughed again.

"And never will be. I am the heir of Death, you fool. Did you really think that you could kill Death?"

The only thing that could kill Death was Death itself.

As brilliant light illuminated them, forcing Anvil to freeze, Sunny raised Serpent with his free hand.

The black odachi rippled, turning into a ghostly stiletto.

And just as his arm started to crumble into ash…

Sunny grinned, turned the blade of the stiletto against himself, and plunged it into his own heart.

Chapter-2247: Throne of Shadows

Sunny had to die, but he could not allow himself to be killed.

He had to be the one to end his own life...

That was easier said than done, though.

After all, he excelled at staying alive against all odds. His soul was vast and tenacious, while his body was like a fortress. He could endure an incredible amount of punishment and heal at stunning speed. Even if his heart stopped beating for some reason, there was a good chance that he could survive by simply forcing his blood to move on its own.

That was why Sunny had pierced his chest with the dark stiletto… with Serpent. With the slaying blade that embodied Death itself.

His eyes widened as the cold blade pierced his heart. That coldness spread in an instant, permeating his entire being… pulling him down and slowing down his thoughts.

It was cruelly painful, but the pain was overshadowed by the dreadful realization of what he had done.

'I…'

He felt it. Death coming to claim what used to be a person — what used to be him. He felt his body growing weak, his soul collapsing, his vision turning dark. This was the end, and there was no escape from that end. No trick he could use, no clever strategy that could save him.

The finality of it all — the eternal nothingness that lay in front of him

— terrified Sunny at the last moment.

At least death was swift and merciful.

He did not even feel the agony of being burned alive by the blinding light… just saw his arms crumbling into ash, as if observing someone else ceasing to exist from a distance.

'Ah…'

The last breath escaped from his lips, which grew forever silent.

The kneeling figure of the Lord of Shadows swayed, and then fell.

However, his body never touched the ground, turning into a cloud of ash before it could. The ash was scattered by the wind.

The last thing to crumble was the hand that still clung to Anvil's blade, stubbornly refusing to let go until the final moment.

Soon, all that remained of the fearsome Lord of Shadows was the black mask that fell to the ground and lay there, forlorn, staring at the sky with empty dark eyes.

…And his shadow.

***

There was a still, silent lake that bathed in the darkness of seven lightless suns.

A great temple of black marble towered above the dark water, full of emptiness.

A legion of silent shadows surrounded the temple, standing on the surface of the still lake without motion, their lifeless gazes turned to the ancient edifice of the temple.

As if waiting for something.

Nothing disturbed the tranquil silence of the dark lake… until, suddenly, a cold wind blew above its surface.

The still water rippled…

Then, without warning, a bolt of black lightning tore the peaceful darkness apart, falling from above to strike the magnificent temple.

It passed through the tiles of its roof, unobstructed, and disappeared inside.

And by the time the black flames retreated, a new shadow stood alone in the impenetrable darkness of the empty great hall.

It was the shadow of a slender young man, his beautiful features still and unmoving.

His eyes were closed.

As the cold winds raged above the surging lake and the seven suns burned with dark flames above it, the young man remained silent and motionless, just like the legion of shadows outside.

But then, his eyelids trembled.

As the young man slowly opened his tenebrous eyes, it was as if a wave of invisible force spread outward from the temple, passing through the silent shadows and making the vast lake surge. The seven lightless suns ignited with a dark radiance, and the still waters boiled.

Something was happening to the black suns, to the dark lake… to the vast expanse of lightless silence itself. As if it was undergoing a profound metamorphosis, reaching unfathomable depths.

The shadow of the young man seemed to break the chains that had kept it motionless, moving slightly… coming alive. He looked around slowly, gaining awareness, then inhaled deeply.

Then, he walked across the great hall of the dark temple, and passed through its gates.

Standing atop the steps of black marble, the beautiful young man looked down at the legion of shadows with his dark, cold, lightless eyes.

And answering to his presence, the shadows, which had always been lifeless and motionless, finally moved.

Those who possessed forms that resembled humans knelt. Those who possessed forms that resembled beasts lowered themselves to the surface of the water.

All of them prostrated themselves before the young man, as if welcoming their lord... their monarch.

Their Sovereign.

The young man looked down at them, his face emotionless and cold…

Then, a sinister smile twisted his alluring lips.

'It worked.'

Sunny wanted to laugh.

He had done it. He had died, and returned from death.

This time, without the help of powerful Memories or the endlessly flowing waters of the Great River.

He had defeated death with nothing but his Will…

Which was to say, he had defied an absolute law, and galvanized his soul into becoming Supreme in the process.

Of course, there was a little trick involved.

If Sunny had been killed, his shadow would have been sent to the Shadow Realm, and there, it would have been turned into pure essence by the world, thus erasing him from existence.

But shadows of those creatures that Sunny himself killed never entered the Realm of Death. They entered his own Soul Sea instead, and joined the ranks of all his previous victims.

So, by killing himself, Sunny had sent his shadow into his own Soul

Sea. That was why he had to die by his own hand, and not by Anvil's blade… and that was how he had been able to will himself into coming back to life instead of being consumed by the Shadow Realm.

When he did, the wall that prevented him from attaining Supremacy was broken.

And his nascent Domain manifested itself into existence.

Looking at the legion of prostrating shadows, Sunny exhaled slowly.

'So this is what Eurys meant.'

These silent shadows…

They were his Domain.

He had been building it all along without even knowing it.

And what a powerful Domain it was!

His sinister smile turned dark and murderous.

'Now, then…'

Sunny looked up.

There was someone out there he had to kill.

Back on the fractured battlefield, the fearsome black mask trembled.

Chapter-2248: Throne of Light

High in the godless sky of Godgrave, Nephis was being reforged.

The incandescent white abyss was her anvil, and her will was the hammer with which she forged her soul into shape.

The pain was the pristine flame that kept her soul pure.

Burning, restoring herself, and burning again.

Being destroyed, being created, and then destroyed again.

Destruction, creation… it was one and the same. For Nephis, they were two sides of the same coin. Her flames could both heal and burn, after all, so she was not foreign to the concept.

Her soul was being reshaped, but it was her will — her spirit — that ended up being tempered with each excruciating rebirth.

Until her soul and her will permeated each other and became too interwoven to be separated, let alone discerned.

At that moment, Nephis felt a profound change happen to her.

It was as if a brilliant spark of a beautiful golden hue had ignited in the blinding radiance of her fiery soul, making the immolating white flames seem dim in comparison.

That spark was a catalyst.

But it was not a catalyst for her soul becoming Supreme — instead, it was a catalyst that ignited her nascent Domain, making it swell with heat, with light… with life.

The fragile, ethereal connections she had established to countless people who had been inspired by her suddenly shone with a

breathtaking radiance, and the radiance spread through the vast web of them, chasing away the encroaching darkness.

Her source element underwent a change, as well… no, not quite. It remained the same — however, it was as if the floodgates that prevented Nephis from experiencing it fully had been opened, and the shallow trickle of essence she had been receiving before turned full and powerful like a freely flowing river.

The dam had been broken.

Each of the countless people whose souls had been ignited by the flames of longing was a source of this radiant spirit essence, and as the spirit essence flowed into Nephis, her own essence was galvanized by it, undergoing a qualitative transformation.

Making her Supreme.

Nephis felt her essence changing, becoming brighter, richer, vastly more potent… brimming with ferocious, unimaginable power. Her soul cores rebuilt themselves, becoming deeper and stronger in order to contain that startling power.

Her Soul Sea changed, as well.

The copy of the Ivory Island there had been lifeless and still before, like a frozen replica, but now, it suddenly seemed much more real. The blades of emerald grass swayed in the wind, glistening with dew. The leaves of the ancient trees rustled peacefully.

The waters of the clear lake rippled as they shone beautifully, reflecting the sunlight.

And that was not all…

The Tower of Hope was not the only landmark in her Soul Sea anymore.

Some distance away, a great castle of white stone towered above the resplendent water. A magnificent black palace was there, as well. A colossal ship drifted on the calm waves, its countless sails full of wind. There were other Citadels, as well…

All of them rose from the water like islands, and the vast expanse of her radiant soul was not empty anymore. Instead, it resembled a small world.

…Nephis survived.

She had survived the incandescent heaven of the Sun God's fallen realm, and therefore, defied both the absolute law of death and the laws governing this broken world.

She became a Supreme.

Her Domain was now truly manifested, as well… and it was both vast and splendid.

Four Great Citadels were empowering it. Dozens of other Citadels belonged to her Domain now, too — that was because the Saints who ruled them had lost their faith in the Sovereigns, but had faith in Nephis instead.

Even those like Seishan had been swayed, choosing her over the Supremes that had failed them.

Dozens of Saints, thousands of Masters, hundreds of thousands of Awakened, and numerous mundane humans believed in her, too. Their souls were a part of her Domain, shining like a myriad of stars in the radiant sky.

After all, Nephis had spent a decade building upon the legend of her clan with Cassie's help, to create a myth of her own. Now, across the two worlds, countless people were inspired by Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan, their souls burning with yearning. Countless people believed in the famous propaganda slogan invented by the government….

As long as Immortal Flame burned, humanity would not be extinguished.

So, it was as if the Immortal Flame clan — and its last daughter — had become synonymous with humanity.

And therefore, most of humanity was a part of her Domain.

Nephis could feel all of them, too…

The connection she shared with those who had been inspired by her was much deeper now, and more universal. It did not depend on distance or proximity anymore, and so, there was a boundless ocean of hopes and desires that washed over her mind, threatening to overwhelm her.

Nephis silenced it, for now — or at least tried to. There would be time to explore this connection later.

For now, she had to finish the battle.

…Boundless power, endless essence.

Full of furious light, Nephis cast her flaming gaze to the ground.

***

Far below, on the ground, the great armies were melting in the flood of Nightmare Creatures.

The sudden snowstorm summoned by the Lord of Shadows had stemmed the tide of abominations, somewhat, and the terrifying explosion caused by Changing Star diminished their swelling number even further.

But people were still dying, and the remnants of the incinerated jungle still threatened to consume them all.

The humans were losing.

…Untill, suddenly, a soft radiance flooded the battlefield.

The soldiers of the united army faltered for a moment, looking at their own skin in amazement.

They themselves were the source of the radiance.

It was as if white flames ignited within all of them, washing away their wounds… and making them much stronger, much faster, much more resilient. Augmenting them with fearsome power.

Those who were on the verge of dying were saved, and those who were beaten and exhausted suddenly found themselves full of renewed might.

The radiant army stirred, meeting the dark tide of abominable monsters... and pushing it back.

Chapter-2249: Depths of Despair

Not long before that…

Sid fell to the ground, blood pouring down the torn, bent metal of her breastplate. It was flowing out of her mouth, as well, but she was more concerned about the armor… the Memory was on its last breath, ready to collapse into a rain of sparks.

It was a shame, too, because the charming enchanter, Master Sunless, had personally improved it for her. More importantly, she was wearing very little under the armor. Becoming one of the Queen's dead puppets would already be bad enough, but shambling around the battlefield both dead and while wearing nothing but her underwear seemed simply mortifying.

'Ah… that'd be embarrassing…'

She reached for her sword and looked up, knowing full well that she would not escape the Nightmare Creature that had thrown her to the ground.

The towering beast loomed above her, foamy saliva flowing between its rotting fangs. Before it could bite down, however, a slender figure in a tattered red dress appeared between Sid and the abomination, stubbornly holding her ground. The wavy dagger in her hand seemed like a toy compared to the immense size of the monstrous creature.

'Felise, you fool…'

Was she hellbent on dying together?

Sid finally grasped the hilt of her sword, wondering if she would be able to stand up. The two of them were probably finished…

They would make for a couple of lovely corpses, though. So… there

was a bright side to anything.

Using the sword as a cane, Sid groaned and rose to her feet.

***

Some distance away, Ray and Fleur were desperately trying to survive in the sea of abominations. They had lost Rani and Tamar in the chaos of the battle a while ago, and the Nightmare Creatures around them were not something a couple of Awakened could fight.

Ray had thought about trying to escape by hiding himself, but he could not take Fleur with him… and he would not abandon her, either, so the two of them were barely staying alive.

...Staying alive for now.

At some point, they found themselves protecting the backs of two unfamiliar Masters — judging by their age and armor, the Masters seemed to be Legacies from the Sword Army side. Neither of the young knights was in good shape, but one of them seemed barely alive, bleeding profusely from a deep cut on his head, mumbling nonsense, and asking for mercy.

"Hey, Mercy… you… you saw it, right?"

The other Master grabbed his friend and pulled him back, saving the young man from the claws of a hideous abomination.

"Saw what?!"

The bleeding knight somehow managed to behead the Nightmare Creature and staggered upright.

"That… that vulgar scoundrel! That profligate lecher, Master Sunless! He's... he's the Lord of Shadows! I knew it. I told you! He has been deceiving Lady Nephis this whole time, the sinister rake!"

The other knight — Mercy — looked at him with concern.

"Were you hit on the head, Tristan? Wait, don't answer that… you were. Anyway, there is no way…"

Tristan shook his head, paying no attention to the blood streaming down his face.

"No… no, I saw it clearly! He is!"

At that moment, Fleur let out a scream and fell. Ray swayed, too, suddenly finding it hard to breathe. A terrifying, maddening presence enveloped their minds, and a new Nightmare Creature appeared in front of them — this one more dreadful than all the rest.

A Great One.

Mercy paled, and Tristan raised his sword weakly. Neither stood a chance in the battle against a Great abomination, especially not wounded and exhausted as they were. But what else could they do?

Simply moving under the gaze of the terrifying being was a difficult task, while the being could obliterate the four of them in one move.

All hope seemed lost…

Until something massive suddenly fell from the sky, flattening the Great Nightmare Creature.

It was…

Ray blinked, doubting his eyes.

...It was a quaint brick cottage with glass windows and a wooden porch.

'Huh?'

The bloodied abomination stirred beneath the cottage, sharp pieces of bone protruding through its hide. Before it could escape, though, a terrifying maw opened in the middle of the brick wall, and the cottage bit down on the Great One, tearing its head off with countless sharp fangs.

'...What?'

Ray, Fleur, Mercy, and Tristan froze, staring at the terrifying cottage

with stunned expressions. For a moment, they even forgot about the sea of abominations surrounding them.

It was then that the door of the cottage opened, and a petite young woman appeared on the porch, floating a few centimeters above the wooden boards.

She looked at them with a pale face, and then shouted:

"What are you waiting for?! Get inside if you want to live, fools!"

Ray stared at the petite floating beauty for a moment, then looked behind her and shuddered at the morbid scene. The spacious room on the other side of the door was littered with bodies, blood smeared across the floor. It was like the belly of an insatiable, man-eating monster.

He was terrified.

'W—what a bizarre abomination…'

Most chillingly of all, some bodies were still moving, suggesting that they had been swallowed whole.

No, wait. Those weren't bodies… they were dozens of injured soldiers, slumped on the floor in exhaustion and treating their wounds!

Ray lingered for a moment.

Then, he grabbed Fleur into a princess carry and jumped onto the porch.

'Ah, whatever! I don't care!'

The two dazed Masters dawdled a little, then followed while muttering curses with shaky voices.

***

Somewhere else, Rain was fighting side by side with Tamar and the Feather Knight — whose name was Telle, apparently. Things were

not going great for the two great armies, and they were not going great for the three of them, either.

Especially for Rain, who felt suffocated by her inability to kill.

And yet, and yet…

She could sense it. The nameless feeling swelling in her chest, becoming clearer and clearer.

It was her awakening Aspect.

It felt as if a seal placed on her soul was slowly crumbling, ready to collapse entirely. The terror of the calamitous battle, the pain and indignation she felt while witnessing all this senseless destruction, the desperate desire to prevent all these lives from being wasted…

Perhaps all she had to unseal her Aspect was find the name for the emotion she felt.

But the correct words were not coming, as if they did not exist in human language.

And the three of them were on the verge of being destroyed, themselves…

A hulking monstrosity had just torn an Ascended knight apart, and was now barreling toward them, frenzy burning in its bloodshot eyes.

Rain paled and raised her tachi, knowing that its blade would not even be able to cut the monster's hide.

In the next moment, however, a fearsome figure of silvery black steel appeared from the darkness, its eyes blazing with infernal red flames. Four clawed hands reached for the charging abomination, piercing its body and raising the massive creature into the air. Then, with a revolting squelch, the Nightmare Creature was torn into four bleeding pieces.

As blood flowed onto the four-armed fiend's dark carapace and evaporated, it turned its fiery gaze down and stared directly at Rain.

The fiend's hellish maw opened… and a grating voice resounded from within.

…Addressing her.

"Protect… auntie…"

Rain blinked.

Huh?

'A—auntie? Me?'

She stared at the towering fiend, stunned.

But… but she was barely twenty-one…

Chapter-2250: Flames of Hope

The abomination was about to finish off Felise, whose dress was soaked with blood by then, and Sid was not fast enough anymore to stop it…

It was then that a soft radiance suddenly illuminated the darkness, chasing it away.

Sid's heart raced.

'...Lady Nephis?'

Was she close? No… the last she had caught a glimpse of her, Changing Star was disappearing into the black sky, too far away to heal the dying soldiers with her soothing flames.

But there was no mistaking it. Sid knew this feeling well, having relied on it to stay alive for many years, across countless battlefields.

Granted, the warmth spreading through her body, washing away the pain, was far more potent than usual. Her wounds were healing much faster than they usually did when bathed in the gentle white flame.

That was not all, either…

There was a soft radiance glowing beneath Sid's skin, and she felt… powerful, invigorated. She was brimming with power, her exhaustion gone. It was as if her body, which had already been at the pinnacle of what an Ascended could achieve, grew twice as strong. Even her soul felt empowered by the white radiance.

'Thank the gods!'

Activating her Aspect Abilities one after another, Sid rammed the abomination with her shoulder and sent it flying back.

'Felise…'

Turning to look at the Handmaiden, Sid could not help but grin.

Felise was emanating the same soft radiance, and her wounds were healing as well.

No…

It was not just Felise. It was everyone.

All around them, hundreds of soldiers — both of the Song and the Sword Domain, not that there was a difference anymore — were being nurtured by the pure white flames. Their wounds were healing, and their power grew.

And further away, it was the same.

Sid's eyes widened.

'How…'

Before, Lady Nephis could only bestow the gift of her flames to her most loyal followers, and only if they were close to her. She had developed that ability over the years, increasing its range and potency — until she could heal entire swathes of the battlefield, thousands of soldiers at the same time.

But now, it was not just thousands… it was hundreds of thousands.

The entire vast mass of the two great armies was being healed and empowered, while Lady Nephis was nowhere in sight.

But even without seeing her, people knew who had saved them.

Voices rose here and there, full of gratitude, relief… and hope.

"Changing Star!'

"It's Lady Changing Star!

"Immortal Flame is with us!"

***

Sitting among the wounded soldiers that the petite fairy had rescued with the help of her terrifying cottage, Ray suddenly flinched.

'What the?!'

The interior of the cottage was suddenly much brighter than it had been before.

All around him, people were glowing…

He was glowing, too.

A familiar warmth filled his body, and the scrapes he had received during the battle disappeared without a trace. The same thing was happening to Fleur, and the two Sword Army Masters that had helped them survive.

In fact, the only person who wasn't shining with a soft radiance was their fairy hostess, who floated in the air with a confused expression on her impishly pretty face.

Ray recognized this feeling…

It was the same warmth he had felt while being healed by Lady Nephis.

Outside the window, the soldiers of the two great armies were all being mended by the white flames, descending upon the sea of Nightmare Creatures with renewed vigor.

One of the two Sword Army Masters was the first one to stand up, summoning his sword and pointing to the door with a determined expression.

"My fair lady, the benevolent mistress of the cottage… I, Tristan of Aegis Rose, am eternally grateful for your kindness. However, my honor compels me to rejoin the battle now that my wounds have been healed. Please, command your cottage to open its door!"

Ray and Fleur exchanged glances.

Rani and Tamar were still out there, somewhere, fighting for their lives. Master Tristan must not have recovered from the blow to his head yet, considering his bizarre manner of speech, but the gist of what he had said was right...

They could not hide away while their comrades were fighting and dying out there on the bloody battlefield.

When Fleur nodded subtly, Ray sighed and rose to his feet.

The rest of the soldiers slowly stood up, as well. They turned to the hostess of the monstrous cottage and waited, their eyes were full of somber resolve.

The petite fairy looked at them strangely.

There was a pause, and then, she said:

"The door has a handle, you know. You can just open it yourself…"

***

Rain stumbled and looked at Tamar with wide eyes.

It was not every day that she saw her friend… glowing softly with a beautiful white radiance, as if she was a celestial being.

'No, wait…'

Why was the Feather Knight glowing, as well?

Why was everyone?

…Everyone except for Rain herself and the towering steel fiend, that was.

Their wounds were healing in front of her eyes, and their movements had turned swifter, the bite of their blades deeper.

For a few moments, the Nightmare Creatures were actually pushed back.

Rain remained still for a moment.

'...It has to be Nephis, right?'

Her head turned, and she stared into the distance.

At the grotesque, harrowing, beautiful creature that towered above the shattered battlefield like a mountain.

Queen Song…

Just as Rain looked at her, a fiery white meteor suddenly pierced the darkness of the black sky and crashed into the towering figure of the Queen, causing a titanic explosion to shake the entire world.

That was Changing Star, returning from the heavens.

But there was something different about her now.

Rain could not see from the distance, however, she knew one thing — the Queen actually staggered from the blow despite not having been bothered by any attack before.

'W—wait…'

A moment later, Rain forgot all about Queen Song.

And about Changing Star, as well.

It was because she sensed something… something that made her hair stand on end.

She sensed the shadows all across the battlefield growing deeper, darker, and infinitely colder than before.

As the great armies bathed in the warmth of the white flames, a sudden chill spread across the battlefield, as if death itself had let out a frigid breath.

And then, the shadows moved.

Chapter-2251: Supreme Shadow

A sudden chill spread across the battlefield, and a moment later, the darkness that had been pushed back by the sea of soft radiance seemed to grow deeper and darker, consuming the pure white light.

Far away from where Rain was shivering in the cold, the King of Swords stood above a fearsome black mask that lay on the ground. The merciless sunlight was pouring from the torn veil of clouds, and so, he remained motionless, his sword still reaching toward the enemy who had turned to ash.

His face was expressionless, but there was a hint of unease in his steely grey eyes.

The Lord of Shadows was gone, killed not by an enemy's blade, but by his own hand…

And yet, his shadow remained.

A disembodied shadow was a strange sight to behold, but it was the mask that made the King wary.

Laying atop the forlorn shadow, the fearsome mask stared back at him, impenetrable darkness nestling in its eyes…

And then, it trembled.

Almost at the same time, the blinding radiance of the incandescent white abyss dimmed. The veil of clouds repaired itself, and the space he had severed was mended, as well.

Anvil was suddenly surrounded by cold darkness.

The fearsome black mask rose into the air, the shadow of his slain enemy rising with it, taking shape… until it turned into a familiar

figure.

The Lord of Shadows looked at the King of Swords coldly, as good as new.

Anvil seemed rattled for the first time in many, many years.

"...Impossible."

It was not that his enemy seemed to have come back to life after being burned to ash by the merciless sky of Godgrave... it was that his subtle, but chilling presence had somehow grown vastly more powerful, now dwarfing even Anvil's own.

The mask dissolved into shadows, revealing a handsome, pale face. There was a sinister smile on the young man's lips, but his black eyes remained bitingly cold.

Smiling darkly, Sunny looked at Anvil.

"Oh, but it is… it is possible, King of Swords."

He raised a hand, commanding Serpent to assume the form of a black odachi, and inhaled the sweet air of the world of the living with a full chest.

…He felt incredible.

His body brimmed with ferocious power — more power than he had ever felt before. The difference between a Supreme physique and a Transcendent physique was not as vast as one between a Saint and a Master, but it was still substantial. The other changes that he had undergone were profound enough to make up for the relative modesty of his physical evolution.

He was still making sense of some of them, but other differences were quite apparent.

First of all, there was the quality of his essence. It had become far more potent, overflowing with an unfathomable amount of cold, fearsome power.

Second, there was the quantity of his essence. In short, it felt... endless.

Sunny possessed seven cores and Soul Weave, so the rate at which he replenished essence had always been abnormally swift. That rate had further improved now that he was Supreme, but it was not the main reason why his reserves of essence seemed inexhaustible.

Rather, it was because of the way he absorbed spirit essence. Before, Sunny could passively absorb small quantities of it when surrounded by his source element. But now, he was receiving a constant flow of it from his Domain — from every silent shadow resting in his soul.

His connection to the silent shadows had deepened and evolved, and since there were tens of thousands of them, the influx of essence from the shadows made it almost impossible for him to exhaust it.

In other words, a Sovereign had access to a nearly limitless amount of soul essence for as long as they were in their Domain. That explained a lot about how Anvil and Ki Song were able to wield their incredible powers, as well as some of their actions during the war…

But Sunny was not like them.

He was quite special. In fact, he was unique.

Because, unlike other Supremes, he carried his Domain within his soul. Therefore, his Domain was self-contained, and would be with him wherever he went. He did not need Citadels to make it stronger… he did not need loyal followers and the faith of the people, either.

All he needed was to collect the shadows of living beings by slaying them.

'What a frightening proposition.'

Sunny was scared to even imagine such power in the hands of someone who was not as reliably sane and mentally stable as he was…

The most drastic change, of course, was his Will. It had become a far

more tangible force, now, as well as far more forceful. Sunny had known how to wield it before, but it was only after he clashed with Anvil and observed him using the Will as a weapon that he truly understood how to control it.

How to bend the world to his will.

It would take him some time to truly master that skill, of course, as well as incorporate it into his combat technique… but he already knew enough to make use of it in a battle.

There were quite a few changes of a lesser scale, too.

The Onyx Mantle, for example… was not Onyx anymore. His armor was still black, but the texture of its polished surface had changed, becoming even darker, even smoother… almost flawless. It had assumed a noble, somewhat eerie quality, as if carved from black jade.

The Onyx Mantle had evolved, as well, becoming the Jade Mantle.

Oh, and of course…

The very nature of his soul had changed.

The soul of an Ascended was contained within their body. The soul of a Transcended expanded beyond the body, partially fusing with the world. The vast soul of a Supreme, meanwhile… could be freely unleashed upon the world via the medium of a Domain, subjugating it.

That was the fundamental principle of what a Domain was, to begin with.

And so…

Looking at Anvil, Sunny unleashed his soul.

He manifested his Domain.

And as he did, the shadows across the fractured battlefield moved.

Chapter-2252: Sovereign of Death

Far away, a brilliant star fell from the dark sky, and a colossal explosion of white flame enveloped the harrowing figure of the Queen. The two unified great armies shone with beautiful light, pushing the flood of Nightmare Creatures back for a few short moments.

The wounded were healed, and the morale of those who had almost lost hope was bolstered.

Sunny smiled.

Nephis had succeeded, as well.

A profound relief flooded his heart. As much as Sunny had steeled it to accept the possibility that countless people would die as a result of their rebellion, consumed by the Nightmare Spell, he was incredibly relieved to know that the worst had not come to pass.

Their plan had worked. Both Sunny and Nephis had become Supreme.

In fact, the two of them seemed to have attained Supremacy at the same time.

Nephis was already helping the two unified armies.

So…

It was only proper for him to lend a hand, as well.

Sunny allowed one of his shadows to separate itself from his body and dart away. Now that he was Supreme, each of his shadows was

deep and vast like an ocean…

A few moments later, the shadow reached its destination.

And opened like a gate that led to the tranquil depths of his lightless soul.

'Come forth, my shadows…'

Sunny laughed.

"Look closely, King of Swords. Look and see why war can never triumph over death!"

As his words echoed in the darkness, a cold wind blew across the battlefield, as though death itself had let out a frigid breath. The shadows moved, and dark figures slowly rose from them like an inky-black sea.

There were a myriad of them… some were small, some were enormous. Some were weak, some were immensely powerful. Some were human, while most were monstrous.

The army of shadows had left the peaceful stillness of his soul and entered the real world, flowing across the surface of the ancient bone in eerie silence.

The shadow of Mountain King was among them. There was a legion of Nightmare Creatures of the Forgotten Shore, led by the appalling Spire Messenger and the Forsaken Knight of the ruined cathedral, and a few Sleepers of the Bright Castle as well, led by the shadows of Harus, Caster, and the lost companions of the first Bright Lord.

The shadow of the Soul Devouring Tree towered above the battlefield, its enormous branches swaying in the wind.

There was a legion of abominations from the Chained Isles, too, led by the shadows of the War Maidens and the twin shadows of Solvane. The Barrow Wraiths Sunny had once slain while defending Rain's school from a Nightmare Gate were there, as well.

The largest legion by far was the Nightmare Creatures Sunny had

slain in Antarctica — Fallen Titan Goliath was among them, as well as Winter Beast. There was also the Defiled Seeker of Truth, the Remnant of the Jade Queen, Sybil of the Fallen Grace… the shadows of Knight Amiran and Saint Dire Fang were there, too.

There were dreadful abominations of the Tomb of Ariel there, as well. The shadows of King Daeron and Wind Flower led them, standing side by side under the sky of the Dream Realm once again.

There were the shadows of various Nightmare Creatures he had killed while wandering the Dream Realm, forgotten by everyone.

Lastly, there was a vast legion of powerful Nightmare Creatures whom Sunny had slain here, in Godgrave. The six Saints of the Song Army he had killed were among them, too, led by the giant with the head of a jackal.

And at the head of the shadow army, serving as its general…

A taciturn knight in an intricate onyx armor sat atop a tenebrous steed, her graceful figure shrouded by a mantle of dread and darkness.

The only shadow that refused to answer Sunny's call was the shadow of Condemnation, which remained quietly in his soul. The rest of them, however, stirred as Saint raised her black sword.

Sunny smiled viciously and looked at Anvil.

"Kill them all."

Saint pointed her sword forward, and the sea of silent shadows surged. As it flowed forward in eerie silence, it separated into three forces.

One of the three forces came to the rescue of the human armies. Nephis had already bestowed the power of her radiant Domain upon the desperate soldiers, but now, countless shadows joined the fight, obliterating the Nightmare Creatures of the abominable jungle…

And with each creature they killed, a new shadow appeared on the surface of the dark lake within Sunny's soul, escaping it moments

later to join the battle on his side.

The second force descended upon the puppets of the Queen, aiming to annihilate them all.

The third force clashed with the remnants of the storm of flying swords, destroying them one after another.

Looking at it, Sunny could not help but shiver.

Even he was a little afraid of his newfound power.

His power… just seemed exponentially terrifying. It was like Death itself.

But maybe that was what it meant, to be a Sovereign. Especially a Sovereign carrying the power of a Divine Aspect.

…And he had no doubt that the Dream Realm hid many horrors that could put even his terrible power to shame. Horrors that could break him, let alone stop him.

As his shadow legions were reaping lives and destroying the forces of the King and the Queen, Sunny turned to Anvil with a pleased smile.

"Not bad for a rookie Sovereign, don't you think?"

Anvil just stared at him coldly, a hint of unease in his grey eyes.

"Natural Supremacy? That is impossible. How did you…"

Sunny chuckled.

"Well, if you wish to know…"

He took a step forward.

"I traveled to the very edge of the Dream Realm, scaled the jagged peaks of the Hollow Mountains, descended to a land below the Underworld to seek counsel from the corpse of a forgotten godslayer, killed the shadow of a corrupted god, forged a blessed sword for an incorruptible soul, cheated Death by taking my own life, and

survived."

Then, he looked at Anvil with dark fury and added in a low voice:

"But mostly… I just really, really wanted to kill you. I guess you just pissed me off that badly, Anvil."

Grasping the hilt of his odachi, Sunny pointed it at the King of Swords.

"So, prepare to die, bastard."

Chapter-2253: Reversal

Even if Anvil had been rattled by the shocking turn of events, he did not allow himself to stay in that state for more than a few seconds.

After all, he had come to this battlefield to fight a Sovereign. It did not matter much to him whether he had to fight Ki Song or the Lord of Shadows…

There was a lot Sunny had to adjust to, however.

The fractured bone plain shuddered as he pushed against it with his foot. His newly found power was too vast, too tyrannical — underestimating his own speed, Sunny failed to align his sword properly and missed Anvil entirely, crashing into him instead of beheading him with one clean, ruthless strike.

Their clash caused a shockwave to tear the world apart, and Anvil was thrown dozens of meters back. The impact was truly terrible.

Sunny looked down at his armor, expecting to see fractures marring the smooth surface of the jet-black jade. However, to his surprise, the Mantle was entirely intact.

It was Anvil's impenetrable armor that dented, instead.

A vicious smile twisted Sunny's lips.

"You must have worked quite hard to forge this Supreme suit of armor..."

A split second later, he was already upon Anvil, slashing down with his black odachi. His speed was so great that it seemed as if Sunny was blinking in and out of existence instead of moving across the weathered bone.

Anvil still managed to deflect the blow, though, staggering back as a result.

Sunny smiled.

"...I bought my armor from a Sleeper for a fistful of soul shards."

Behind the smile, however, he was a little wary. Serpent's Class depended on Sunny's own, but its Rank depended on his mastery of Shadow Dance. So, it was still a Transcendent Titan despite Sunny already being a Supreme one… Anvil's condemning sword, though, was Sacred.

If Sunny was not careful, his Shadow could be destroyed.

So, he allowed three of his shadows to flow down his arms and envelop Serpent, instead, augmenting both its power and its resilience.

'Huh…'

It was only then that Sunny considered his current state.

His original body had been destroyed, so only the seven incarnations remained. It was a strange reversal — before, he had been a human who needed to spend essence in order to turn into a shadow, but now being a shadow was his natural state. Instead, he needed to spend essence to assume the form of a human.

The expenditure was minuscule compared to the unfathomable rate with which he replenished essence, but it was still a curious fact.

In any case, one of his shadows was serving as a gate for the silent legion, three were augmenting Serpent, and three were serving as his body now.

Which meant that he was still three times stronger than Anvil — more so, really, since the Shadow Realm Fragment was empowering him.

The King of Swords stood no chance… it was as if their roles had been reversed.

Sensing the gap but remaining indifferent to it, Anvil grasped the hilt of his Sacred sword with both hands and looked at Sunny somberly.

"You talk too much."

Sunny grinned as he raised the black odachi.

"That's because I have a lot to say…"

They clashed once again, moving with stunning speed. This time, Anvil was the one to lash out with his sword, empowering his attack with razor-sharp Will — just like he had done before to cut Sunny's courage, determination, and hope.

However, this time, his cold Will clashed with Sunny's own.

And although Sunny was new to wielding his Will in a battle, he managed to resist Anvil's ruthless strike unscathed.

His grin widened.

"Now, then. Let me get a few things off my chest…"

As the smile disappeared from his face, replaced by a chillingly cold expression, he exploded into a whirlwind of darkness. The clangor of steel roared above the fractured bone plain, and the ancient bone itself groaned, huge chunks of it plummeting into the black smoke veiling the burning Hollows below.

Sunny unleashed a barrage of strikes upon Anvil, suppressing him and pushing him back.

"Where should I start?"

He cut down, used the momentum of his deflected attack to close in, and rammed the King of Swords with his shoulder. Anvil let out a pained grunt.

"First of all… you are a rotten bastard. Even worse, you are also an utter fool. Did you really think that strangling your heart and turning yourself into an emotionless tyrant would save you from the curse of your Flaw? That you would not lose anything if you did not care

about anything?"

Anvil caught the black blade of the serpentine odachi in a bind, but Sunny lowered his hands and easily overpowered him, circling the Sacred sword and pushing his own up. Anvil leaned back at the last moment, but a long cut was still left on his cheek, swelling with blood.

"...That is the entire reason you lost everything, you vile fool! If you were not such a sorry excuse of a father, your children would not have grown to despise you. And if you were not such a failure as a ruler, your subjects would not have turned their back on you. All of this mess… is your doing! One foolish man has almost destroyed the world! Bastard, are you proud of yourself?!"

Anvil did not respond, straining to survive in the onslaught of lethal attacks. Perhaps engaging in a conversation was a luxury he could not afford at the moment… perhaps he simply did not care.

His cold grey eyes were calm and focused.

Sunny snarled, thrusting his odachi forward to destroy one of the red runes glowing on the surface of Anvil's armor.

"Secondly… damn, where do I even begin? Stifling humanity's growth to prevent more Gates from opening? Suppressing and eliminating our most talented warriors to stop them from becoming Saints? Abandoning billions of people to die because trying to save everyone seemed less likely to succeed? Starting a bloody damn war against fellow humans instead of aiming your precious swords at the Nightmare Creatures?! You scum… that was your grand strategy? That was the best you could do?!"

He growled and took a step forward instead of taking a step back to avoid the falling blade of Anvil's sword. Catching it on his odachi, Sunny pulled both blades downward and slammed his elbow into Anvil's face, feeling with great satisfaction something give under his titanic blow.

As Anvil staggered back once more, blood flowing from his nose, Sunny looked at him with murderous madness burning in his black,

terrifying eyes.

"And lastly..."

He aimed his odachi at Anvil's heart.

"Bastard, what nonsense were you spouting about forging Nephis into a flawless sword? How fucking unhinged are you, you piece of trash? Come on, say it again… I dare you! Say it one last time before I pull your tongue out, cut it, and then feed it back to you. I'm listening!"

The black odachi lashed out once again, throwing Anvil to his knees.

Bloodied and reeling, the King of Swords looked up at Sunny…

And smiled.

Chapter-2254: Spirit of Flame

Their clash had been swift, but violent.

However, it was also… a bit one-sided, which left Sunny wanting more.

Well, there was no helping it. As much as he would have wanted to break the King of Swords slowly, now that he was a Supreme, the imbalance of power between them was simply too great.

It was not only because Sunny was a Supreme Titan while Anvil was a Supreme Beast, or because of the fact that Sunny wielded a Divine Aspect — it was also due to the fact that Anvil's powers were both undermined and severely suppressed.

His Aspect was one of a craftsman and enchanter, as well, only loosely tied to combat. Anvil's armor and sword had flared with various potent enchantments while they fought, but Sunny was powerful and resilient enough to shrug the effects off.

It was almost like Anvil's own strategy during the war...

Nothing was of use in the face of overwhelming strength.

And there were six incarnations of Sunny, while Anvil was alone.

So, the King of Swords looked quite battered by now.

Many of the runes glowing on his armor had been destroyed, and the armor itself was slow to repair itself after enduring countless blows. His face was bloodied, and his hair was wet with sweat despite the chilling cold. Even his Sacred sword was nicked, its blade damaged in several places.

Nevertheless, Anvil did not seem disturbed.

Instead, creepily enough, his smile seemed genuine when he looked up at Sunny.

'...What is this bastard smiling about?'

Anvil remained silent for a few moments, then spoke in a hoarse voice:

"You can mock me all you want, Lord of Shadows. But… look… isn't my masterpiece beautiful?"

With that, he turned his head and looked into the distance, where the towering figure of the Queen was staggering after enduring the obliterating shockwave of a terrible explosion.

As Sunny's face contorted in a wrathful grimace, he added:

"She has surprised me once more. She... is complete."

***

Far away, Nephis had descended from the godless sky like a falling star. The darkness welcomed her with a soothing cold, and a split second later, she collided with the colossal vessel of the Queen, her flames blossoming into a terrifying explosion.

This time, the titanic creature actually staggered. More importantly, the burns on its flesh did not disappear immediately.

In that short moment when Ki Song was reeling, Nephis looked to the spot where Sunny had been kneeling, on the verge of being killed by Anvil.

Her radiant figure suddenly shone even brighter.

'He's alive…'

A sense of profound relief washed over her.

Nephis had been scared that she would be late, but the Lord of Shadows did not need her help. Not only had he survived, but he had also achieved the same feat as her — he had broken the barrier

preventing them from attaining Supremacy and became a Sovereign.

The Sovereign of Light, the Sovereign of Shadows…

With the two of them becoming Supreme against all odds, victory was all but assured.

'We've… won?'

She allowed herself to bask in that startling realization for a moment, then strangled it ruthlessly.

Arrogance was a deadly poison. Sure, it seemed like Anvil and Ki Song, who had been weakened by their nefarious plot and by battling each other, were at a dire disadvantage against the usurpers… but it was in these last moments when victory seemed so near that one could touch it when countless warriors had perished, lulled into complacency by the illusion of safety.

Nephis was not going to make the same mistake.

Some distance away, the two great armies were shining with the radiance of her newly established Domain. The darkness stirred, and countless shadows rose from its depths, descending upon their enemies… Nephis thought that she saw a few familiar figures among the dark legion, but her mind soon wandered back to her enemy.

The Queen had regained her balance in mere moments and froze, studying her with the eerily empty canvas of the golem's featureless face.

"...Supremacy?"

Instead of answering, Nephis raised the Blessing and delivered an annihilating strike.

She had nothing to say.

Her soul had been destroyed and then rebuilt countless times, and the cores she had sacrificed were now whole again. So, in the end, she did not have to use the [Ruin] trait of the Blessing — at least for now. She was not that desperate yet.

But there was still a problem…

Even now that the Blessing had become a Supreme blade, channeling Supreme soul flame, the damage it dealt was not significant enough to seriously harm the colossal flesh golem. What's more, the Queen could transfer all harm to her countless puppets, and although they were being destroyed by the legion of shadows, they had not been destroyed yet.

Nephis needed a different way to attack the Queen… a more monstrous attack, and one that could be sustained instead of being momentary.

Landing on the ground, Nephis looked up at the harrowing creature that she needed to destroy… she could not even see all of it from that angle because of how immensely tall the titanic flesh golem was.

She was like a speck of dust in front of a mountain, full of resolve to bring the mountain down.

Lowering her head, Nephis took a deep breath — or went through the motions of doing so, rather, since her current form neither had lungs nor needed to breathe.

She was still in the form of the spirit of light. Her radiant figure was like a vessel that struggled to contain an ocean of furious flame…

And as the Queen leaned down to crush that vessel, Nephis looked up with cold contempt, unleashing the flame.

Allowing the thin barrier of the human-like form to dissolve into pure radiance, thus assuming her true Transcendent form.

An unimaginable, roaring mass of white flame escaped from her disappearing figure, rising to meet the Queen. The flames moved with purpose and intent, like a living creature, the billowing cloud of them constantly shifting and dancing in the vast darkness of the fractured battlefield.

The darkness reeled back in fear.

The vessel of the Queen was more than a kilometer tall… and so, the

mass of white flames rose to be more than a kilometer tall.

It fell upon the titanic creature, burning it.

And then enveloped it whole.

Chapter-2255: Shadow Legion

Out there on the battlefield, Sid rolled, evading the maw of the hideous Nightmare Creature she and Felise were fighting. The abomination moved on the edge between the radiance emanated by the human army and the deep darkness that surrounded it, its shape both hulking and indescribably frightening.

The situation had vastly improved after the miraculous flames enveloped the desperate soldiers. Awash in pure light and empowered by its brilliance, they cast their despair away and threw themselves into the battle with renewed vigor. Not only had they become stronger, but their wounds would also heal and disappear without leaving a trace…

It was as if they were immortal.

An immortal army of hundreds of thousands of Awakened — could there be anything more terrifying?

The endless tide of dreadful abominations suddenly did not seem so fearsome anymore. But therein lay the problem… while it felt like the soldiers had become immortal, they had not. They recovered from dire wounds in mere moments, but if a person was outright killed or torn to pieces, even the miraculous flames would not save them.

So, the battle was far from being over, and survival was still not guaranteed.

That was why Sid cursed as she scrambled to evade the lunging Nightmare Creature.

However…

The Nightmare Creature never reached her.

A chilling wind blew across the battlefield, and the shadows moved. In the next moment, the lunging beast slammed into the ground, convulsed, and let out a frightened wail. Something massive was in the darkness behind it, pinning it to the ground, hurting it.

As Sid watched in stunned horror, the massive abomination was dragged into the darkness in the blink of an eye. Its wail was cut off abruptly.

All she saw out there was a glimpse of a terrifying beak, a mess of gaunt limbs, and a mass of black feathers.

A deep fear that she thought she had forgotten rose from the depths of her heart and grasped it with icy claws.

Looking at Felise, Sid shivered and said, her stunned voice full of disbelief:

"S—Spire Messenger? It was a Spire Messenger?"

What was one of those cursed things doing in Godgrave?

…At the same time, all around the battlefield, the silent legion of shadows descended on the spawns of the scarlet jungle.

A harrowing massacre unlike anything the seasoned warriors of the great armies had seen before began, washing the white bone in blood.

In one corner of the battlefield, Revel was kneeling on the ground, pale and weak from paying the price for having gone against her Flaw to join the battle in daylight. She could barely move…

Before she was swallowed by a towering Great abomination, though, the shadow of a giant with the head of a jackal slammed into it, and the shadow of a monstrous wolf-like warrior sank its fangs into the creature's throat.

Her eyes widened.

Somewhere else, Seishan, Cassie, and Moonveil were fighting side by side — the latter had recovered from her wounds thanks to the white

flames, but was still a bit dazed. As they were besieged by a swarm of grotesque spider-like monstrosities, twin shadows of a stunningly beautiful woman cut into the swarm, tearing the abominations apart.

All around the battlefield, the soldiers watched in awe and terror as the eerie legion of silent shadows flowed out of the darkness like a river, slaughtering their enemies. Most of the shadows were just as dreadful as the Nightmare Creatures that besieged the radiant army, and yet there was no mistaking who commanded them.

"The Lord of Shadows!"

It was hard not to realize that it was the sinister sellsword Saint who had summoned the dark legion from the depths of some forgotten hell, considering that his famous Echo was leading the silent charge, galloping atop the dreadful steed as her black blade rose and fell, reaping the lives of powerful abominations like Death's own scythe.

Two furious crimson flames burned behind the visor of her helmet, and a trail of severed bodies was left in her wake.

The graceful knight of darkness was not the only being whom the soldiers recognized, though.

All across the battlefield, those who had been in the Antarctic Center during the Chain of Nightmares faltered for a moment, looking up at the towering figure of the Fallen Titan, Goliath.

The Fire Keepers and the Handmaidens caught glimpses of the Nightmare Creatures of the Forgotten Shore.

Others were terrified to see the hulking figures of the dreadful abominations who had been slain in front of their eyes during the conquest of Godgrave.

It was as if the gates of the Land of the Dead had been opened.

There were many instances like that, instilling the soldiers with relief, gratitude, and fear in equal parts.

Even knowing that the silent legion belonged to the Lord of Shadows, it was hard not to fear it… and fear him, as well.

At a certain spot on the battlefield, Rain let out a long sigh and lowered her tachi for a moment. Tamar was looking around with a pale face by her side, while the Feather Knight stared at a bizarre figure that moved across the sky in the distance, half-obscured by the vast whirlwind of flying swords.

"This… this is… it's Winter Beast."

Her voice was full of wariness and loathing.

Rain gave her a long look, and then forced out a smile.

"Don't worry. I am quite certain that these things won't hurt us. They belong to my brother, I think."

Telle and Tamar turned to her with similarly confused expressions.

"Your brother?"

"You have a brother?"

Rain coughed and scratched the back of her head in embarrassment.

"Uh… yes. Actually, you already met him."

Tamar raised an eyebrow.

"I did?"

Noticing another Nightmare Creature barreling towards them, Rain raised her tachi.

"Yeah. My brother… he is the…"

The rest of her sentence drowned in a bestial howl of the lunging abomination.

Far away, the colossal vessel of the Queen was being consumed by the dancing mass of white flames. She clawed at her own flesh, trying to extinguish the fire that was consuming her, but to no avail.

The flesh golem was being annihilated by the fire faster than Ki Song could repair its flesh. At the same time, Nephis was healing her soul

faster than Ki Song could destroy it…

Until the Queen shifted strategy, transferring the damage dealt to her vessel away.

Almost instantly, countless puppets across the battlefield ignited like torches and turned to ash.

A moment later, even more burned, and a moment after that, even more…

It did buy Ki Song some time, allowing her to unleash the full power of her insidious Aspect upon Nephis and temporarily catch up to her in their vicious battle of attrition.

There were not that many of her puppet's left on the battlefield, though.

And even those that remained were being swiftly burned by the flames and slaughtered by the shadows.

Chapter-2256: Abominable Curse

"...She is complete."

Sunny traced Anvil's gaze and remained motionless for a few moments, looking at the towering figure of the Queen's vessel, which was enveloped by white flame like a colossal pyre. Her dead flesh was burning.

Sunny's pale face was illuminated by the distant light of Neph's Transcendent form.

Looking at her, he took a deep breath and forced his murderous anger to subside.

His expression turned cold and somber.

Glancing at Anvil, he remained silent for a bit, and then said with a hint of disdain in his voice:

"You see, this is your root problem. A failure of imagination — or ambition, perhaps."

Taking a step forward, Sunny pressed the tip of his odachi against Anvil's neck.

"Nephis? Complete? She is not complete, Anvil… she won't be complete until she becomes Divine. Unlike you and the other two ghouls, she will not surrender until she conquers the Nightmare Spell entirely. That, in the end, is your sin. That is the reason why you don't deserve to sit on the throne of humanity, and she does. That is why you must die."

Anvil glanced at him with a dark smile.

"Funny, isn't it?"

Sunny's expression grew colder.

"And what, exactly, do you find so funny?"

Anvil shrugged.

"She is just like her father, in that regard. Ah… but I think that she resembles her mother much more, instead."

Sunny took a deep breath, holding himself back.

There was a reason why he was wasting time conversing with Anvil instead of simply finishing him off, of course. It was not because Sunny had suddenly developed a fondness for villainous monologues… although he would lie if he said that giving Anvil a piece of his mind had not felt good.

No, it was because Sunny had to get something out of Anvil before the King of Swords met an ignoble end.

There was something he had to know.

He exhaled slowly.

"Right… you bastards killed Broken Sword, as well. Was that also for the greater good?"

Anvil's eyes darkened.

"You should know by now why he had to die, Lord of Shadows. All of this could have been avoided if not for that selfish man's folly."

Sunny smiled faintly, suppressing the desire to cut off the King's self-righteous head.

Controlling his expression, he said:

"Enlighten me."

Anvil let out a sigh and calmly looked Sunny in the eye.

"It was because he absorbed Weaver's forbidden Lineage, of course. Our hands were tied the moment he did."

Sunny allowed himself to frown slightly, pretending to be clueless.

As far as everyone was concerned — even Cassie and Nephis — he was the heir of Shadow God. No one knew that Weaver's blood flowed in his veins, instead.

Anvil would not know, either.

He raised an eyebrow and asked, hiding how vital knowing the answer to that question was to him:

"And why was that so important? What was it about Weaver's lineage that made you betray your comrade? To kill your own leader?"

Anvil smiled coldly.

"Children… you don't know anything, do you? Well, no surprise. Some things are not meant to be known by mere mortals."

As the hurricane of swords above them shifted, countless blades changing direction, he leaned forward a little and asked:

"Why did Broken Sword have to die? Let me ask you a question instead, Lord of Shadows… have you ever been to the Chained Isles? You should have. Why did the gods destroy Hope's kingdom and imprison her in the Ivory Tower?"

This time, Sunny's frown was genuine.

He hesitated for a few moments, and then answered in a subdued voice:

"Because daemons… were their Flaw."

Anvil chuckled.

"Indeed, daemons were the Flaw of the gods. Because daemons were children of the Forgotten God."

Sunny drew a breath as Anvil shook his head and continued:

"And yet, the gods did not punish and imprison all seven daemons. Only Hope. Why was that?"

Sunny hesitated with the answer.

"I'm not sure. I heard once… that it was because she was the only daemon who was worshiped by humans."

Anvil looked at him with a somber resignation and nodded, not paying attention to the blade of the odachi that had cut into his neck.

"Yes. It was because Hope was the only daemon who was benevolent toward humans, those who carried the sparks of the original Desire. She came to live among them, cared for them, and bestowed gifts upon them. As a result, she was beloved by humans… worshiped by them."

His voice turned heavy and dark:

"But she was a daughter of the Forgotten God. She carried the Lineage of the Forgotten God. And therefore, everyone who worshiped her… was worshiping the Forgotten God. Was propagating his name, his divinity, and his power. And the more they did…"

Sunny's eyes widened slowly, but Anvil did not seem to notice, continuing in the same stark tone:

"The more he stirred in his slumber, coming closer and closer to awakening. That was why the gods destroyed the Kingdom of Hope and imprisoned her. That was why they had forbidden the daemons from siring offspring, as well. And that is why Weaver's Lineage, created in secret, is an abominable curse that should never have existed."

He gritted his teeth.

"The Forgotten God is closer to awakening today than he has ever been. Now, then… imagine if Broken Sword — the most revered hero of humanity — was allowed to build a vast and powerful Domain while carrying that abominable curse. How many humans would

have known him, loved him, and worshiped him? What would have happened then?"

Sunny shivered, feeling his mind go blank for a moment.

He did not know what to answer… he did not want to know the answer.

He would not have answered if not for the pain of his Flaw, which forced him to be honest even if he wished to deceive himself.

Feeling something cold permeate his chest, he said slowly:

"The Forgotten God… would have grown more aware of reality. Or maybe even awakened from his slumber completely."

Hearing his words, Anvil smiled darkly.

"Yes. Now, you know... that is why we killed Broken Sword. Because an heir of Weaver must never be known, must never be loved, and must never be worshiped by humanity."

Chapter-2257: Mercy of Shadow

'Must never be known. Must never be loved. Must never be worshiped.'

Sunny stared at Anvil, no emotion showing itself on his face.

A deep, boundless darkness nestled in his eyes.

Far above them, all around them, countless flying swords rustled as they slowly assembled into a colossal dome…

Sunny looked up, then sighed deeply.

'...Good thing I became fateless, then.'

The world had forgotten him, after all.

Nobody could love him…

Because nobody could know him.

Not truly, anyway.

As the full weight of that realization settled on his heart, he raised his head and looked into the distance. There, the titanic vessel of the Queen was being consumed by fire.

The distant radiance of the beautiful white flames illuminated his face, but failed to dispel the shadow drowning his eyes.

Sunny remained motionless for a few moments, then lowered his gaze to the ground.

'And good thing I had always shied away from the spotlight.'

He had been pushed to hide the full extent of his power by the very

nature of his Aspect, staying in the shadows and avoiding being noticed, let alone known. Unlike Broken Sword, who had been the most renowned and revered warrior of humanity, Sunny used to be seen as merely a supporting character of someone else's story.

It was as if fate had been guiding him to this moment from the very first day. It had both led him to the forbidden lineage of Weaver and given him the necessary tools to escape its curse.

Even without knowing the reason why the Weave had been forbidden, Sunny mostly managed to avoid paying the price for receiving its incredible boons.

Earning a True Name in the First Nightmare, possessing a Divine Aspect, finding a Lineage Memory, and accomplishing all his astonishing feats... anyone else would have become a venerated champion of humanity, but Sunny had hidden himself well. He detested the idea of being called a hero, anyway, so staying in the shadows suited his tastes far more.

Nephis could stay in the spotlight for both of them.

There was a small problem, though…

Sunny had done well in the past, but currently, he was not doing that great as far as remaining unnoticed went. In fact, he really messed up.

Sleeper Sunless, Awakened Sunless, and Master Sunless were all obscure and seemingly insignificant figures.

The Lord of Shadows, however, was quite infamous. Worse than that, he was poised to become a Sovereign. His renown would explode and spread throughout both worlds, surpassing even that of Broken Sword…

Because Broken Sword, despite all his accomplishments, had been a mere Saint in the public's eye — the first and the most powerful of all human Saints at the time, but still only a Transcendent. Sunny, however, was a demigod now.

Not only was he a demigod, but he was also the only equal Nephis,

the shining star of humanity, had. Her counterpart, most powerful ally, and rumored lover as well.

In other words, he had entered the stage — and the spotlight — in a manner that was impossible to conceal. Once the war was over, billions of people would come to know him, and although it was doubtful that he would be beloved by many, he would definitely be feared, revered, and worshiped by all.

The soldiers of the two great armies would return home to spread the tales of his terrifying power and merciless blade. They would also be full of gratitude since he had saved countless lives.

And his fame would only grow from there.

'Ah. How troublesome.'

The future was not entirely grim, though. There was a silver lining, as well… it was that Sunny's Domain did not depend on people. He only needed shadows, and shadows — unlike humans — did not carry the sparks of the original Desire in their souls. Shadows did not even have souls, really, so being worshipped by them would not bring about the end of the world.

So, Sunny did not have to cripple his power if he wished to avoid disturbing the slumber of the Forgotten God, who would swallow all of existence if awakened. Which was good, because they were going to need all the power they could get.

He only needed to disappear into the shadows again, somehow.

"...Hypocrite."

Shaking off his reverie, Sunny looked at Anvil with a calm, cold expression and said in a measured tone:

"I really hate hypocrites like you the most, Anvil. You say that Broken Sword had to be killed to prevent humanity from worshiping him… and yet, you Sovereigns managed to hide your own existence for almost two decades, all in order to contain Asterion. Why was it that you could hide, but Broken Sword had to die?"

He shook his head in contempt.

"No... just admit it. Be honest for once. You killed him because you hated him. As simple as that."

Anvil smiled coldly as Sunny raised a hand, having removed it from the hilt of his odachi.

"...What do you even know about hatred, boy?"

With that, his presence exploded with tyrannical power, and the storm of swords around them froze, countless blades assembled into gargantuan runes. The runes ignited with vermilion radiance, and Sunny suddenly found himself awash in a blood-red glow.

As Anvil moved his hand, a single harrowing blade fell from the sky, and the sky itself seemed to follow. A hurricane rose, the wind howling deafeningly as it swirled around them, and as the falling sword plummeted from the heights, its dreadful sharpness seemed to grow exponentially keener with each glowing ring of runes that it pierced...

Until it seemed sharp enough to cut the fractured bone plain, sever the floor of the burning Hollows, and part the sea of ash below.

…Of course, first, it would pierce Sunny.

Looking up, Sunny grasped the Memory that he had summoned a moment before and raised his hand higher.

The severing sword fell on him in a furious maelstrom of wind. The powerful gale raised a cloud of ash into the air, and by the time the ash settled…

Sunny was still standing in the same spot, unmoved, and entirely unscathed.

There was a small stone lantern in his hand, its gate wide open.

Lowering it, he slowly closed the gate with his thumb.

Anvil's eyes widened.

"How… did you withstand that attack?"

Above them, the runes lost their glow, and countless flying swords crumbled into a river of scarlet sparks.

Sunny smiled.

"I did not withstand it. I simply sent your sword into the Shadow Realm. Why should I overcome your great power when I can escape it with a little trick, instead?"

The smile drained slowly from his face.

"Now, then…"

The black odachi lashed out, sinking into Anvil's flesh.

Sunny's expression turned dark and chilling.

"This is for the soldiers of the First Evacuation Army and the people of Falcon Scott, whom you abandoned to death. Samara, Dorn, Belle… and countless others. Remember their names, bastard."

The King of Swords managed to avoid a fatal blow, but Sunny was already delivering another slash. Anvil tried to deflect it with his vambrace, but failed. Red blood flowed onto the white bone, and a severed hand fell onto the ground.

"This is for the soldiers who died here in Godgrave, fighting in your senseless war. Each and every one of them was a person, Anvil, not a statistic. None of them had to die. Though I doubt that a monster like you would care."

Anvil did not react to losing a hand and instead staggered back in an attempt to retreat.

But there was no escape from Sunny.

The black odachi bit deep into Anvil's thigh, leaving a dreadful wound on it. More blood splattered onto the surface of the ancient bone.

"This is for Nephis, whose childhood you destroyed. You cruel, vicious thug… did you have fun tormenting a child? Taste some torment from me, then."

Gritting his teeth, Sunny kicked Anvil in the wounded thigh and watched him fall to his knees.

A rain of swords plummeted from the sky to destroy Sunny, but a great wave of shadows rose from the ground and turned into an impregnable wall, preventing them from interrupting him.

He took a deep breath.

"And this… this is for me. This is for all the suffering I had to go through because of you, and others like you."

Many things had changed about him, but one of them remained the same. Sunny... Sunny never forgot his grudges.

Looking at the kneeling King with cold contempt, he raised his odachi and prepared to deliver the final strike.

For the first time, a clear emotion ignited in Anvil's eyes.

Anger... reluctance... despair…

He struggled to stand up, blood flowing down his mangled armor.

"You… you can't kill me… Nephis, she is the one who…"

Sunny struck down without waiting to hear the rest.

The black blade of his serpentine odachi passed through the King's neck without meeting much resistance, and a severed head rolled to the ground.

The iron crown slipped off and fell onto the bloodied bone with a rattle.

Anvil's body swayed, and then toppled heavily in the clangor of steel.

Far above, all of the remaining swords dissolved into a storm of

sparks, and for a moment, it seemed as if the sky was aflame with scarlet light.

It was really a breathtaking sight.

Looking at it, Sunny could not help but remember the crimson tapestry of polar lights above Antarctica.

As the sparks disappeared, he took a deep sigh and closed his eyes.

A few moments later, Sunny said quietly:

"Find peace within me… even if it's more than you deserve, bastard."

This was the mercy of Shadow.

Chapter-2258: Regicide

Far away, the colossal vessel of the Queen crumbled, its flesh burned away by the furious mass of white flames. The river of blood that had been contained within it boiled as it escaped. A billowing, scorching cloud of crimson vapor obscured the world, and in that haze, the flames condensed to form a beautiful figure.

She seemed to be woven out of pure radiance, her silhouette both vague and blinding.

Her incandescent sword fell without mercy, parting the river of blood.

A sound that resembled both the murmur of a vast sea and an agonized groan rolled over the fractured battlefield. Hundreds of puppets were severed, and countless more turned to ash.

Nephis pursued her enemy, her sword and her will relentless.

An enemy like her was a fearsome obstacle for the Queen. After all, the Queen held authority over blood and decay, while Nephis possessed no blood in her Transcendent form, and could resist decay with her flames. Her soul was still susceptible to the insidious influence of Ki Song's Aspect, but thanks to the Blessing, her power only grew in proportion to how badly her soul was damaged.

That is why Nephis had chosen to fight Ki Song, the stronger of the two Sovereigns, while relying on Sunny to face Anvil.

That was why she was winning.

She was going to kill the Queen soon.

'How… strange.'

Even focused entirely on the battle, Nephis found herself distracted by the reality of what was transpiring.

She had spent most of her life waiting for this moment. Waiting for revenge. From the moment the Immortal Flame clan fell into neglect and obscurity until now, she always knew that she would kill the traitors who had ruined her family one day.

Her hatred of the Sovereigns did not originate from one source, from one fateful injustice. Instead, it was born from a thousand unforgivable grievances that she had endured growing up.

The hideous trauma of the violence perpetrated against her as a child… the deaths of the loyal servants who had chosen to remain with the falling clan despite the danger… the subtle look of defeat and despair that appeared on her grandmother's stoic face from time to time, when she thought that no one was watching.

All of this and more. So much more.

That was why Nephis had expected to feel a storm of emotions when the day of her vengeance finally came. An unbearably bitter, but indescribable sweet feeling of bloodthirsty glee… a fury beyond anything she could ever imagine...

But now that her goal was so close, she found herself feeling surprisingly little.

It was partially — mostly, perhaps — because her feelings had been burned away by the cleansing ruthlessness of her Flaw. But it was also because killing the Sovereigns had never really been her true goal.

The Sovereigns, odious as they had become, were merely a symptom of the larger curse that plagued the world.

The world itself was the problem.

The children who died in the throes of the First Nightmare. The adults who grew up to become callous and heartless, twisted by the fear of falling asleep. The Nightmare Gates that opened near parks and schools, the frenzied monster that roamed the streets looking for

prey.

The incalculable loss and sorrow that countless people felt every day...

The Nightmare Spell.

The Sovereigns might have killed her father and obliterated her clan, but it was the Nightmare Spell that had created the Sovereigns. It was also the Nightmare Spell that had taken her mother and grandfather away along with an entire continent.

That was what Nephis had once believed, at least. Now, she wasn't even sure if the Nightmare Spell was the cause, or merely another symptom.

In any case, disposing of the Sovereigns was just a stepping stone to reaching her true goal. She was not a trembling child to whom the three Supremes were like unfathomable monsters anymore…

She had outgrown them.

Still… Nephis had hoped to feel something, at least. If not for her own sake, then at least for her father's.

But reality was cruel.

Just like Nephis was cruel.

As her searing sword cut the river of blood, annihilating some of it, the number of puppets continued to dwindle.

Until there was none left.

And then, the moment she was wary of came…

Far away, in the midst of the great unified army, Cassie staggered and screamed. Then, her flesh started to blacken, as if it was being burned from the inside… Nephis could not see it, of course, because of the distance separating them, but she could feel her friend's desire for relief from the terrible agony through the connection they shared due to her Domain.

As Cassie burned, her crumbling body was enveloped by a beautiful white radiance and healed.

...Only to be burned again the next time Nephis brought her sword down on the dwindling river of blood.

And as her delicate body was destroyed and rebuilt, a tiny drop of the Queen's blood coursing through her veins, mixed with her own, was annihilated — a tiny drop, but not all of it by far.

The Queen spoke to her then:

"Don't you feel pity for your friend?"

Did she?

Nephis wasn't sure that she did. That she was capable of feeling anything, anymore.

But then…

Finally, an emotion came.

It was not fury, not bloodlust, and not the dark glee of being close to exacting her vengeance.

Instead, it was… compassion.

It was concern and worry for her friend.

It was also relief of being able to feel anything at all.

Nephis did not seem to have lost all of her humanity, in the end...

Perhaps her efforts to ground herself in human things and passion had not been in vain, after all.

'I'm sorry, Cassie…'

Descending upon the Queen in a storm of flame, Nephis continued to cause her friend indescribable pain and heal her.

"Can you feel it, Queen Song? Your daughters have turned their backs

on you. Your callousness has driven even them away, and now, they are a part of my Domain."

It wasn't all of them, just yet. But Seishan was the key. With her choosing her sisters over her mother, Moonveil had followed… Beastmaster, as well. The rest would fall behind their eldest sister, too.

Boiling and seething, the greatly diminished river of blood rippled and coalesced into a human figure. Ki Song looked at Nephis, a pale smile illuminating her beautiful face.

"Are you saying this to shake my resolve?"

Nephis shook her head.

"I just want to see if you care about them at all."

The Blessing lashed out once again, scorching the ancient bone and forcing Ki Song to retreat.

"Beastmaster was barely alive when I healed her. Moonveil was dying… she would have been dead by now, if not for me. Their mother led them to their deaths, while their enemy saved them. Isn't that ironic? Even as we speak, my flames are permeating them, granting them power. However…"

Her voice grew cold.

"My flames can both create and destroy. Now that they are a part of my Domain… do you think I can burn them to ash, instead? Shall we see?"

The smile on Ki Song's face turned brittle.

"Are you threatening to kill my daughters, Nephis?"

Instead of answering, Nephis lunged forward and pierced her with the incandescent blade of the Blessing.

Far away, a terrible wound opened on Cassie's chest, and she fell to her knees, her flesh being burned and blackened, then mended by the

white flames.

Nephis felt a new emotion…

It was anguish.

This battle of theirs was going to end soon.

She said calmly:

"No… I am promising to keep them alive. As long as you don't retreat from this battlefield until one of us is dead."

The Queen had to have other puppets hidden in secretive places. Even if Kai had managed to destroy those that had been left in Ravenheart, there would have been more elsewhere. And since any of them could serve as Ki Song's primary vessel, the only way to kill her was to make sure that she chose to fight to her death.

The only weakness the Queen had was her daughters. Her love for them, no matter how twisted, was her flaw.

And Nephis was not above using that flaw to destroy her.

Ki Song raised a hand and grasped the scorching blade of the Blessing, looking at the beautiful spirit of light in front of her with her eerie dead eyes.

"Do you think you can kill me here, Nephis?"

Nephis channeled her flames through the Blessing, knowing that Cassie was screaming somewhere far away.

"Did you think that you could kill my father?"

As Ki Song pulled her closer and thrust her pale hand into the incinerating radiance of Neph's Transcendent form, shredding her soul with her Will, Nephis asked evenly:

"Did you think that you could destroy the Immortal Flame clan?"

The two of them stood still, ravaging each other.

"Did you think that the end justified the means? That all your sins would be forgiven, as long as you had won?"

There was one more emotion, now…

A strange, childish sense of hurt and resentment.

"Then why didn't you win?! If only you had won… then I wouldn't have to… I wouldn't be suffering all this pain because of you!"

Somewhere far away, the last of the Queen's blood evaporated from Cassie's veins. The blind seer curled on the ground, shuddering, tears streaming down her blackened face.

Moments later, the soft radiance erased the terrible burns, restoring her exquisite beauty.

But the echoes of pain in her eyes remained.

Ki Song slowly shook her head, her smile slowly crumbling.

"You don't even know… what you are unleashing, child…"

And then…

She burned.

She burned and burned, disappearing into the merciless flames.

But until the very end, she did not retreat.

That was how Ki Song, the Raven Queen, died.

Chapter-2259: Triumph

Sunny stood above Anvil's corpse, looking silently into the distance.

The battlefield had grown eerily quiet, at some point.

The storm of swords was gone. The sea of dead puppets had been eradicated, as well. Now, his shadows were finishing off the remaining Nightmare Creatures of the jungle… and the few Great Ones whom he had brought here himself, as well.

The battle was all but over.

And with it, the war was all but over too.

A deep sigh escaped from his lips.

'The Sovereigns… are no more.'

Well, two of them were no more, at least.

The third one still remained somewhere out there, shrouded in mystery.

But that was a problem for another day.

'Come to think of it, we are the Sovereigns now, instead.'

Sunny could not quite fathom that everything had ended just like that. He had been preparing for this battle for close to two years… Nephis and Cassie had been building up to this moment for much longer, still. The threat of the Sovereigns had been so oppressive, and had ruled their every breathing moment for so long, that it was hard to accept the fact that it was all over.

But maybe that was the point.

After all, the very reason they had conspired to eliminate the Sovereigns was that the Sovereigns were incompetent. Despite their great accomplishments, Anvil and Ki Song had been inadequate in front of the dire trials facing humanity today.

They had been a titan with feet of clay.

The King of Swords, that madman, had even wanted to die… at least that was the feeling Sunny got there, at the last moments. Granted, Anvil had wanted to die in a different way.

The road to Supremacy had been long and arduous, but the battle itself was swift and decisive.

It was a triumph.

But...

'When did it all go wrong for them?'

And would the same happen to him and Nephis?

Surely, not.

If for no other reason than that they already had a bitter example of what not to do.

'...We've won.'

Sunny finally realized that unbelievable fact.

Unlikely as it was, their conspiracy had achieved its goal. The tyrants were gone, and he and Nephis were perfectly poised to usurp their thrones.

There was just one problem…

As he stood without movement, there was a rustle of wings, and Nephis landed on the ground behind him. She had assumed her human form once again, the fiery radiance of her true self only betrayed by the blinding white radiance burning in her eyes.

Her face was still and expressionless, devoid of any emotion. She must have lost the ability to feel once again… perhaps she had lost more than ever before, having undergone the terrible trial of attaining Supremacy in the incandescent white abyss of the merciless sky above Godgrave.

She looked at Anvil's corpse, not showing any particular reaction.

After a while, Nephis said:

"Somehow, I… I imagined that I would be the one to kill him."

Sunny had imagined the same, as well. He had even considered leaving the King of Swords alive for a bit longer to let Nephis find closure by confronting him one last time…

For the first time, really. She had never faced Anvil, her father's killer, without a veil of deceit hiding her true feelings before.

And now, she never would.

There was little closure to find on this ravaged battlefield, today.

If there was, it would have been neither Sunny nor Nephis who killed the King. It would have been his son, Mordret, instead.

Actually, Sunny was quite surprised that Mordret had not shown up until the very end. He had been completely sure that the Prince of Nothing would pull some stunt or another during the battle.

Perhaps something went wrong in True Bastion, preventing Mordret from playing his carefully prepared cards?

Granted, he must not have expected to be forced to fight a Cursed Demon today.

Sunny sighed.

"Killing him… was easier than I had expected."

Nephis turned to him and remained silent for a few moments.

"Maybe it was because he was already dead, where it counts. You would not know, because you have not spent a lot of time around Hollows… but looking into his eyes felt like looking into my mother's eyes, sometimes. It was an eerie feeling."

Sunny lingered a bit, then asked:

"What about the Queen?"

Nephis answered evenly:

"The Queen was fierce. The Queen was powerful. She… fought until the very end."

Her radiant eyes dimmed slightly.

"But she had a weakness, and because of that weakness, she was undone."

'So Ki Song is dead too, then.'

It was really all over. They had succeeded.

Things went better than he had expected…

They went almost exactly as he had hoped.

Almost.

Sunny smiled darkly.

"Are you wondering if you have a weakness, as well?"

Nephis tilted her head a little, looking at him with her expressionless gaze.

"Everyone has a weakness, Sunny. I have a… couple, myself."

He nodded.

"How… do you feel? The Sovereigns are dead. Your family is avenged. You must have waited for this moment for so long, and now it's here."

She lingered for a bit.

"I don't feel much of anything, really… yet. I think I will feel more later. For now, I am simply content. A hard task is over. More arduous tasks are to come."

Sunny sighed, then took a step back.

There were so many things they had to do, so many things they had to discuss.

Before it all, he wanted to simply embrace her, hold her, and kiss her.

To share the joy of their victory with her, even if Nephis wasn't capable of feeling that joy just yet.

But… he was not destined to feel the soft touch of her lips today.

Instead, he felt the cold touch of Weaver's Mask as it settled on his face.

Raising his black odachi, Sunny smiled bitterly and said in a cold, emotionless tone:

"It's time for you to die, then, Changing Star."

Far away, his dark legion had already slaughtered the remaining abominations. The shadows did not retreat back into his soul, however…

Instead, they surrounded the two battered armies, looking at the soldiers in eerie silence.

The human shadows raised their weapons.

The monstrous shadows bared their fangs.

Nephis frowned.

"What is this?"

Sunny let out a disdainful laugh.

"This? It's betrayal, my lady. I would have asked for forgiveness, but really, it's your own fault. Has no one ever told you not to trust a man whose loyalty can be bought?"

Chapter-2260: Peace

Neither the Sword Domain nor the Song Domain had won the war.

Instead, both of them ceased to exist. Sunny and Nephis had won the war instead.

Changing Star was destined to become the new Sovereign of humanity…

However, the Lord of Shadows could not stand by her side.

Because he was the fateless heir of Weaver, the Demon of Fate.

Simply disappearing into obscurity was not going to work, either. Anvil and Ki Song were able to hide their existence because they had become Supreme in the darkness of the Underworld, unwitnessed by anyone… Sunny, however, attained Supremacy in the most flamboyant fashion.

He became Supreme in front of hundreds of thousands of Awakened warriors, summoning a legion of shadows to save them from the tide abominations and slaying the King of Swords in full view of everyone who had the ability to see.

So, there was only one solution…

The Lord of Shadows had to die.

And he could not simply die, either, since that could potentially turn him into a revered martyr.

He had to waste all the goodwill he had earned first.

Far away, the soldiers grew tense as they looked at the legion of silent shadows that now faced them, ready to attack.

Some gazed into the distance, as well, where the Lord of Shadows was pointing his dark sword at Changing Star.

Their eyes were wide with shock, and their faces were pale.

But the soft radiance still illuminated their souls and their bodies, so they were not afraid. Many gritted their teeth, grasping the hilts of the weapons tighter.

Sunny stared at Nephis from behind Weaver's Mask and sneered.

"Changing Star, Changing Star… you are surprisingly naive for someone so exceptionally strong. But then again, you are so righteous and benevolent… disgusting, really. Did you really think that I would share the throne of humanity with someone — anyone — when I can sit on it alone?"

He took a step forward.

"Anvil and Ki Song had the right idea, you know. There can only be one person wearing the crown. They had the right idea, but what could I do? I wanted to be that person. I could not kill them both myself, though, so I needed to use someone gullible as a distraction."

Sunny chuckled.

"So I used you. And now… I have no use for you anymore."

Nephis pursed her lips, looking at him calmly.

A few moments later, she asked:

"So it… it was all a lie?"

Sunny laughed.

"Of course! Did you think I enjoyed being treated as your toy? Did you think I wanted to spend time in your company? Ah, I hated every minute of it. Seducing you was surprisingly easy, but enduring the burden of your naive infatuation was an unpleasant chore."

She tilted her head, then sighed and raised the Blessing.

"I… see. So it was like that, then. I… understand. No, maybe I don't. But you are right. I should not have trusted you."

Her eyes shone with blinding radiance, and she said in an even tone:

"I think I will feel hurt by your betrayal… later. Maybe I will even be hurt by having killed you. So, I should hurry up and kill you soon."

Sunny smiled bitterly behind Weaver's Mask.

The two of them looked at each other, the air practically crackling with tension at the point where their gazes met.

For a few moments, the entire world seemed to stand still, and the pressure continued to build until it became crushing.

The shadows stirred, growing deeper and deeper. The blade of the Blessing shone with radiant light, chasing the shadows away and illuminating the two Supremes as they prepared for battle.

Then, in the blink of an eye, both Sunny and Nephis lunged forward.

There was a flash of light, and a thunderous thunderclap…

And when the light dimmed, the soldiers saw the Lord of Shadows kneeling on the ground, Changing Star's blade buried in his chest.

Sunny groaned, struggling to grasp its blade.

Looking down at him, Nephis spoke solemnly:

"Three Supreme warriors of humanity died today. Ah, what a waste…"

A heavy sigh escaped from her lips.

And at the same time, Cassie's voice resounded in Sunny's head:

[Nephis says not to be so dramatic. You're not really hurt!]

Sunny shuddered, still pretending to be in pain.

The Blessing was indeed buried in his chest… but the area around the

supposed wound had turned into an intangible shadow just before it hit, so he was not wounded. It was still a bit painful, but since Nephis had not put any killing intent into her strike, his soul was mostly intact.

[Well, tell her to act her part better. Wait, no… actually, never mind. Tell her she did well!]

Nephis was not known for her acting skills. She was doing her best.

For a few moments back there, Sunny had wanted to reenact their vicious battle in the Crimson Spire. He had imagined losing the fight, then hearing Nephis ask why he allowed her to win in a trembling voice.

But then he realized that there was no need to deceive her into making it seem like she killed him.

He could just ask.

So, he had told what needed to happen to Cassie, who relayed it to Nephis.

And as a result, the Lord of Shadows was dying now.

[She says that you owe us a good explanation later.]

Sunny forced out a smile.

[I'll… try.]

Would he even be able to explain? Probably yes, with some trouble.

'She trusts me enough to go along without asking why... why is this so sweet?'

With that, Sunny pretended to convulse…

And then dissolved into shadows.

At the same moment, his dark legion disappeared, as well, returning into his soul.

Nephis was left standing alone, like a sole island of light in the ocean of darkness.

Victorious.

The long war... was over.

***

Some days later, a towering Dream Gate opened in the clear sky above Bastion, and the beautiful silhouette of the Ivory Island slowly emerged from it, drifting among the clouds to hover high above the great castle.

Millions of people had gathered on the streets of the city to watch the triumphant return of Changing Star, the last daughter of the Immortal Flame clan…

The new ruler of humanity.

High above them, Nephis was looking down at the familiar sight of the sprawling city that had grown on the shores of Mirror Lake. Then, with a sigh, she turned away and left the balcony.

Descending the stairs, she walked through the corridors of the Ivory Tower and entered a spacious room.

There, a beautiful woman sat in a wheelchair, positioned in front of the window. Her face was emotionless, and her gaze was strangely hollow… as if she was not there at all.

Placing a vase with fresh flowers on the table near the bed, Nephis walked over to the window, leaned against the windowsill, and looked at the woman quietly.

She did not speak for a while, then sighed.

"Hi, mom. I am sorry if you are uncomfortable… it's just that it's difficult for me to come to NQSC, these days. And I don't know how much longer it will be safe for you to remain there. So… I asked Cassie to bring you here."

Nephis lingered for a few moments.

"I am Supreme now. And I avenged dad. His killers are in the grave… well, two of them are, at least."

A shadow suddenly ran across her face.

"Oh. Right. You wouldn't know… for you, they would have been your friends, still. In that case, I am sorry. Your friends have passed away."

Then, she smiled awkwardly.

"By the way — I guess I have a boyfriend now. He is very handsome. I'm sure you would have liked him… oh, but things are a bit complicated between us at the moment. Things are complicated in general."

With a sigh, she looked in the window and said wistfully:

"Our world is being consumed by the Dream Realm. There's so much to be done before it is swallowed entirely… I am terribly busy, and he is too."

She looked at the woman and smiled.

"We need to become gods, after all."

With that, Nephis inhaled deeply and headed for the door.

She did not know how much time they had left, but it was probably not as much as they hoped.

***

Somewhere far away, a desolate land lay under a starless sky, shrouded in eternal darkness.

There was a colossal crater at the heart of that land, and on its edge, a dark city stood, empty and forlorn.

Nothing moved in that city…

Until, suddenly, a magnificent black temple appeared there, as if it

had stood in the darkness all along.

Soon enough, two figures emerged from the temple.

One of them was a young man with pale skin, wearing a simple black tunic.

The other was a petite woman who floated a few centimeters above the ground, with a grim expression on her face.

Looking around, Aiko shook her head in disbelief.

"Gods. I really never thought I'd ever return to this hellhole. Hey, boss, do we really need to be here?"

Sunny looked at her and shrugged.

"There's almost no Nightmare Creatures here anymore. It's one of the safest places in the Dream Realm, really… plus, can't you see in the darkness? What are you so angry about?"

Aiko stared at him with indignation.

"What am I angry about? My job! I'm jobless again! All the effort I spent on building the Brilliant Emporium brand, and my boss just had to go and become the most villainous scum of humanity! And then die. Couldn't you at least have the decency to stay dead after dying, huh, boss?!"

Sunny coughed.

"Decency? What is that?"

Then, he patted the petite girl on the shoulder.

"Don't be sad though, Aiko. Do you think that war profiteering is all that? Let me tell you…"

He gestured to the dark, desolate streets.

"Colonialism! That's where the real money is at. And Forgotten Shore is a prime colony location."

Sunny smiled.

"So… what do you say? Shall we build a city here?"

A peaceful city away from all the strife.

It would stay peaceful for a bit, at least...

[End of volume nine: Throne of War].